

A Dragon's Gift

by anhedral

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Summary: Astrid and her dragon exchange midwinter gifts. The experience is not quite what the young woman was expecting.

1. Chapter 1

****AN:**** Chapter 1 was my entry to a story-writing competition with the theme 'Holiday', hosted on the Sticks and Stones HTTYD forum.

'A Dragon's Gift' can be read on its own, although there are occasional references to events in my earlier story 'Learning Curve'.

Toothless, Hiccup and the gang belong to Dreamworks and Cressida Cowell.

* * *

><p>A Dragon's Gift

****Chapter 1****

The young woman sat apparently alone on the boulder beach, her chosen rock comfortable enough to her toughened form. It was one of those rare winter days in Berk, blessed with the unlikely mix of light airs and sunshine. The rays seemed so precious at this time of year, not by virtue of their warmth (for they carried very little), nor so much for their welcome brightness, but for the way they transformed everything they touched. Placid and aquamarine, the waters of the bay seemed to tempt a swim despite the frigid temperature, while over the quiet ocean the sparse clouds hung low, incandescent curtains of ruby and orange haloed in azure by their icy friends above. Even the rocks around her were changed, their textures magnified, their colours deepened and saturated. With every small fissure and vein laid bare, it was as if each stone had been entranced by the sunlight, made aware of its own uniqueness, enabled and encouraged for this brief spell to tell of its own long history.

Astrid revelled in the unreal light, ever-grateful that Berk was not quite far enough north to lose the sun entirely in midwinter.

It was rather melancholy, she realised, to think such magic would only last for a few minutes at best. But such thoughts she could fend off easily enough, because of course she wasn't quite alone. Just off the beach, a glittering apparition of blue and green quartered the mirror of the sea. Viggen's wings beat quick-slow-quick, her head flicking this way and that, eyes ever sensitive to the sudden, bright flash of the mackerel that were her favourite food. A brief squawk then, a nimble midair pirouette, and now the dragon's body angled steeply downward. With two quick beats to gain speed she collapsed her wings to her back, drew up her legs, and lanced into the shoal. The percussive clap as her head struck the surface rang out clearly to the shore, and now the dragon was treading water, steadying herself on outstretched wings as she snapped at the stunned fish that rose to left and right. The light transfixed her; water streamed from Viggen's jaws in slender torrents of brilliance, a myriad of rainbows forming and reforming and lost forever in an instant.

Astrid hoped that, even when the sunlight had passed, the memory of this day would remain forever bright within her mind. She hoped that Viggen would not grow tired of her company, for she knew that her own fascination with the Nadder would never end. And she worried about the festival of JǼ³¹ to come.

Viggen waded heavily ashore, still swallowing the last of her catch. Breathing out an oily waft she collapsed next to her human, gurgling in the low, musical tone that signalled her deep contentment. Astrid knew just how to prolong the moment. Shuffling over slightly, and smiling because she knew exactly what was going to happen next, she moved her hand to the preferred spot on the lower jaw. What was it about this place on dragons? The gurgle became a quiet rumble and then a purr, the dragon's eyes catching Astrid's for a moment before every muscle in the great body relaxed. The colours in the dragon's scales and hide stayed clear in her thoughts, just as surely as the hues gently slid from the sky and from the stones.

How did I deserve this, she thought, continuing to rub at the textured skin even though her companion was now fast asleep. In the two short months since the great dragon's defeat, she and Viggen had become almost inseparable, just like Fishlegs and Chops, his Gronckle. Just like the twins and their Zippleback. Even Snotlout and that huge Nightmare. Hiccup and Toothless she left out of such comparisons; she wouldn't pretend to understand the depth of their connection. But for the rest of her dragon-bonded friends, as well as for herself, it seemed such a one-sided deal.

The incomparable gift of flight. Companionship, affection, loyalty, all freely given. Sometimes, it seemed, even something close to love. And for what? Meagre scratches, a kindly smile, a few token fish for creatures quite able to provide for themselves.

Who really were these subtle creations that had wound their way so effortlessly into human hearts? And what motivated them to act as they did when they received so little in return?

The questions had been there for a while, niggling at the back of her mind. For a few weeks they'd seemed unimportant, but as the midwinter

festival approached she found them harder and harder to ignore. It was a time for the villagers to mark the hinging of the year, to look forward to the bounty of lengthening days to come, to celebrate their success in staying alive despite all the hardships the world could throw at them. In Astrid's family, it was also a time for the giving of gifts to the special souls in one's life. And for Astrid herself, that now included a dragon.

What could she possibly give to her friend to mark how she felt, to express how she could no longer imagine a life without her companionship?

Eventually, when she couldn't bottle up her worries any longer, she shared them with the only person she could. Hiccup's reply surprised her.

"You know, I used to fret about exactly the same thing. I mean, I suppose the tail fin was kind of a gift to Toothless, but that... well, that happened under special circumstances. But the fin aside... I desperately wanted to give something back, something tangible, something he would appreciate."

"But you don't worry about it any more?"

"No need to. I got firm reassurance on that point."

"I don't understand. Reassurance?"

"Mmmm, yes that's right."

Hiccup hesitated, seemingly distracted for a few seconds, his eyes glancing aside. As if reaching some sort of agreement, he turned back to address her directly.

"It's kind of hard for me to explain. But there's someone who could. If you like, I think I could arrange an introduction."

Astrid came closer and prodded him firmly on the shoulder. "You," she said in playful accusation, "are being cryptic. Again. Must be Frjǫðgr..."

She paused, holding his gaze, hoping for further explanation. None was forthcoming. She sighed, and pulled back.

"Fine. Cryptic it is. I accept anyway. I want to meet this mystery advisor."

Hiccup gave her a small smile that she found impossible to interpret.

"Good. Meet me by the forge at midnight."

She could only wonder at the strange assignation, but she was committed now.

* * *

><p>Incredibly, it had stayed calm into late evening. The heavens were veiled with thin cloud, but above them the northern stars must have been shining strongly, for a pale greenish light filtered through

from above. It quickened and faded with an irregular pulse, bathing the woodland floor in an otherworldly glow. Thus lit, the way was simple enough to navigate, and the going was easy after the passage of dragons over the past days. Frost crackled on dead leaves underfoot as the three friends, two walking upright and one on four legs, made the traverse of Berk.<p>

Astrid reflected again on the changes of the last weeks. Had anyone told her three months ago that she'd be out at the dead of night on midwinter's eve with Hiccup and a Night Fury, calmly walking to an undisclosed meeting to learn more about dragons, she'd have laughed in their face. Just before she hit them, probably.

"Hiccup, we've been going for ages! Where are you taking me?"

She was intrigued rather than anxious, even when she realised they'd reached a part of the woodland she'd never visited before.

"Almost there now."

And indeed, there was something up ahead. A faint orange glow could be made out through the close-spaced trunks. They were on a narrower path now, heading straight for the light, which brightened as they neared. Eventually Astrid could make out occasional licks of flame, and half-remembered stories from childhood suddenly came back to her. Tales of caution and warning, tales of strange, dangerous creatures from other worlds making their home in Midgard for a spell, in special places, at special times. For the first time that evening she became uncertain.

"Hiccup, I don't know about this..."

But her friend showed no sign of concern, just continued steadily on, as if any pause would make him late for a party he didn't want to miss. Toothless nudged her gently, his huge eyes reassuring in the ambiguous light.

They breached the last line of trees, and Astrid stopped dead in her tracks.

A sizable bonfire occupied the centre of the clearing. All around it dozens of dragons were gathered in a great conclave, variously standing, lounging or even sprawled out in complete relaxation. All of the species she knew were represented, as well as several she didn't. A low cacophony of chitters and croons rose up from their mass, and their shifting shadows, thrown by the long tongues of flame, made hideous, demonic forms as they played across the trees beyond the glade.

Hiccup seemed completely unfazed, smiling calmly back at his companions frozen, wide-eyed stare.

"What, didn't you think that dragons celebrate midwinter too?"

"Dragons... _celebrate_?"

She could barely whisper his words back at him as the implications tumbled round inside her mind. Rather than try to make sense of them, it was easier to listen to what Hiccup said next. If anything,

however, the words that followed only added to her confusion.

"Sure. Tonight is special for them. It's a time for them to forget old rivalries, to share stories, to learn new songs..."

"Stories... songs..."

Her mind rebelled, not wanting to recognise the truth of his words, but there was no doubting the evidence of her own eyes. Questions began to churn within her, mounting up; in desperation she clutched at the first one to rise out of the morass.

"Hiccup... you knew about this? How did you know about this place, these... things?"

He turned to face her, his manner as straightforward and patient as could be. He might as well have been explaining the basics of flight to one of his slower students.

"It's simple. Toothless told me."

The nearest dragons fell abruptly silent, their gaze falling on the trio of newcomers. The rest quickly followed, and a sense of keen anticipation filled the air, potent, palpable. Astrid quavered as more dragons than she'd ever seen turned their full regard upon her. The crackle of the fire was almost deafening to her now.

"Come on. She's waiting for you."

Astrid considered herself to be as open-minded as any of the villagers, at least as far as dragons were concerned. But this was far too much to deal with all at once. Her body fell back on instinctive responses and she stumbled forwards as if in a dream. Dimly she became aware of a familiar silhouette, a form and gait that were known to her, a colouration she would recognise under any circumstances. With a rush of relief she ran forwards to the one known, comforting element in her view.

"Viggen!"

The Nadder nuzzled her carefully, but there was something new in her demeanour. Through the gentle attentions of her dragon Astrid picked up a sense of longing, almost of expectation. In her fond glances Viggen seemed to be hoping against hope, seeking to strike some vital spark, sensing that this was the moment. Hiccup came up alongside the two of them.

"You wanted to know what you could give to your dragon this holiday. There really is only one thing she desires now, one thing she values above all else. She needs to have your absolute trust."

"I... I don't understand..."

"The promise they hold out forever is very great, but there is a price, of sorts. If you trust her tonight, things will be different between you hereafter. Believe me when I say she cares about you very, very much. You need to trust her enough to put yourself in her hands, to let go, even to let her in, to an extent."

"But I do trust her! Every time we go flying..."

"This is different. This requires something more."

Astrid forced herself to pause, and tried to imagine a life without Vigen. It was inconceivable.

"I do trust her." Her voice was calmer now, strong and certain.
"Completely."

"Then tell her, now."

The Nadder was still there, standing quiet and patient. Astrid hesitated but a moment, then bent to her dragon's ear and whispered the words as she stroked the smooth scales of the crown and nape. Immediately Astrid became aware of a prickling awareness stirring somewhere deep down low within her consciousness.

"Hiccup?"

"I'm still here."

"It's like... is it... _music?_"

"That's what I heard the first time with Toothless, yes. But I can't hear anything right now. Only you can hear this tune. She is singing her love for you."

Astrid started to rock slowly on her feet, lost in the infinite care contained in her dragon's eyes. Hiccup moved to catch her as her balance failed.

"Soon, Astrid. Soon, you'll know it all."

As the assembled dragons crooned out their approval, the Night Fury and the young man lowered Astrid gently to the floor of the clearing.

2. Chapter 2

****Chapter 2****

* * *

><p>The sense of danger must not disappear
The way is certainly both short and steep
>However gradual it looks from here;
Look if you like, but you will have to leap

- WH Auden

* * *

><p>She groped towards wakefulness, her thoughts swimming about with all the strength and purpose of a beginner doggy-paddling through soup.<p>

She felt no particular inclination to open her eyes.

The brush of a light breeze on her face. The random patter of pine

needles dropping to the forest floor, strangely loud in her hearing. She was outside, then.

For some reason she wasn't cold, and didn't miss her bed one bit.

Definitely a day to take one's time. Time enough to remember...

...to remember a dream of strange song sounding clear and resonant and right in her mind. The notes had flowed quick and cleansing as snow-melt in Spring, clearing away old blockages and debris, re-establishing the channels so long run dry. And following right behind those beautiful tones came a great cascade of images, ideas and emotions, flooding down the now-clear pathways, as if a dam had burst. She felt she would be overwhelmed, such was the surge of thoughts too long held back, all jumbled up and pushing forwards, and all insisting on her attention right now.

But riding over it all Astrid had felt a powerful sense of someone-not-her wanting and wanting and needing so badly, if only she would agree to remember the routes the song had opened up, allow them to carve their proper ways clean and deep, and never to forget the cadence of those sweet tones.

And in her dream she had allowed it, not knowing and not interested in any other choices, and in the moment of her decision her dragon's radiant joy had flashed bright and focussed, the images sudden and coherent in her mind.

::bright sun flash of gold on sea Astrid flying on Viggen fish flash beneath quick wings Astrid happy Astrid-Viggen-together...::

The song was still there, within easy reach. No need to catch it by the tail; it had coiled itself around her.

Not a dream then. It had really happened. As the memory of that epiphany coursed through her, Astrid let her eyes crack open.

And immediately realised something was very, very wrong.

A watery dawn sun filtered through the trees, but the colours were... off, somehow. She'd never perceived those hues of brown and ochre, never had the saturation hit her so forcibly. She picked up a siskin flock, manically pulling seeds from Autumn's alder cones. But these birds seemed fantastical and alien, so vivid and piercing was their colouration.

And had her vision always been so wide? All at once she could see the trees behind, the remains of the bonfire in front, and off to one side the dark mound of Toothless, curled up and dozing with Hiccup. All without moving her head.

She couldn't see her Nadder, though.

Other senses made themselves known. Bewildered, Astrid realised she knew, just knew, which trees had given fuel to the fire last night. Oak, birch, whitebeam and rowan were in the scent of the dying embers before her. Arctic fox and roe deer were in the air too, and the musky reek of otters hunting the rockpools, far, far off on the

shore.

Astrid struggled to her feet, briefly surveyed the world from twelve feet up, wobbled, and fell over. She narrowly missed the sleeping form of a young woman with tangled blond braids. Vaguely she realised she must have slept close to this female, all throughout the small dark hours.

And then Astrid caught sight of the long tail snaking out behind her, bright with blue and green scales. The spines along its length rose and fell slightly, in time with her own heartbeat.

A cold, hard terror gripped her then. Astrid raised her head from the dirt, fixed slit pupils on the young man and the Fury, and shrieked.

::HICCUP!::

* * *

><p>The ground trembled, and Viggen shivered awake with a start. It was very cold. Strange; she couldn't remember ever feeling cold before.<p>

But she did remember last night, and with that thought the notion of cold just didn't matter any more.

Her thinskin had done it. Had trusted, welcomed, invited, and a delighted Viggen hadn't waited for a second ask. Entranced, blind to all else, the Nadder sang out strong and confident, and with that melody the dragon laid bare her most eager thoughts. They mingled with those of her companion, and Viggen fell dizzy into that longed-for complexity. Astrid's mind was strange and wonderful indeed.

They would discover the world anew, explore and make perfect sense of it together, legs, wings, hands and all. They would be alive to each other and inseparable from now on, a new entity under these Northern skies. She couldn't wait to get started.

Odd that she couldn't smell any other dragons this morning, or hear the usual skitter of voles in the leaf litter. Worse still, her vision seemed to have contracted, all the colours dulled. In fact, all of the physical world seemed to have lost its edge somehow. It puzzled and disoriented her, and in any other company she might have felt threatened.

Viggen glanced down and recoiled instinctively at the sight of thin, pale skin and the ridiculous woven body-coverings.

"TOOTHLESS!"

* * *

><p>"Well, I suppose that went as well as we could have expected..."<p>

::Mmm?::

"Those two. Hush, don't wake them. I want to see the look on Astrid's

face when she..."

::Right. Remind me again why I bonded with you?::

"She was ready. You said so yourself, you lazy lizard."

Toothless raised his head, suddenly alert, sensors raised and eyes wide.

::Errrr, Hiccup...::

"What?"

::Might have a little problem here...::

* * *

><p>The four friends sat in an uneasy huddle to one side of the glade. Astrid was in no mood to be placated; she was still getting used to her new vision, and the blind spot in front of her nose was intensely annoying. She thrust her head forward, twisted her neck to one side, and fixed Hiccup with a baleful one-eyed glare.<p>

::Trust her, you said! It's what she wants, you said! Well, guess what? I did! And now look!::

Hiccup instinctively held up his hands, part conciliation and part self-defence, but Toothless was quicker. Suddenly Astrid's view consisted only of a pair of narrowed green eyes and rows of sharp, sharp teeth, only partly concealed behind the Fury's snarl.

::Calm down! No-one meant for this to happen. And besides...::

Toothless pulled back, put his teeth away, and gave Astrid an appraising look that the young woman found immediately disconcerting.

::...I think I like you better as a Nadder.::

The grass in front of the Fury exploded in magnesium flame, but the black dragon was unperturbed.

::See what I mean? Exactly the right temperament; no wonder Viggen likes you. Nice shot, by the way. For a beginner.::

::I was aiming for your HEAD!::

Hiccup thought he should step in before one of them was incinerated or maimed.

"Enough, you two! Toothless, you're not helping! Astrid, what about Viggen?"

At Hiccup's words Astrid pulled back abruptly, and very, very carefully extended her muzzle towards her companion. They had managed, with some difficulty, to persuade Viggen to keep most of her clothes on. She'd been sitting there quietly, just running her fingers again and again through her hair, apparently fascinated by

the texture. She got up as Astrid came near and put on a brave smile, but it quickly turned to a frown.

"Small. Weak body."

Viggen looked down at her hands and wiggled her fingers.

"Thumbs are good. I like those. Like wings better, though."

::Oh Viggen, what ever are we going to do?::

Viggen's frown shifted to a look of pure, bleak remorse.

"I did this. To you. Didn't mean it. Didn't mean to hurt you."

Viggen sank back down, drew in on herself, a pathetic figure. Astrid could barely hear her now.

"So much wanted to show you. Went too far."

And at that, Astrid felt her anger dissolve away. She found she didn't have in her to blame Viggen, and she couldn't see any profit in thinking about what might have been. Things were the way they were, and they needed to deal with them together. She just didn't know how.

But for starters she hooked her front horn under Viggen's smock, and hoisted her back up; Viggen had used the self same move on Astrid several times in the past weeks. As Viggen smiled weakly back at her, several things occurred to Astrid that she hadn't realised until that moment.

Both of them were still alive.

She could really know her friend now, better than ever she could have hoped before.

And maybe, just maybe...with a little luck and a lot of help, they could make something work.

"Fly."

::Viggen?::

"Fly now. Find a way for us, up there."

It was a beguiling notion. Astrid gave her wings an experimental shake, then spread them wide. She let out a squawk of surprise; by Freyja, this felt _good!_

Hiccup was coming over, carrying a bundle. From somewhere, goodness knows where, he'd magicked a Nadder's saddle.

"Astrid, I think you'd better give Viggen what she wants."

3. Chapter 3

****Chapter 3****

The sea spray stung her eyes and the wind tore at her clumsy wings. She had no idea what she was about, but persevered anyway, not having any other choice. There was a dragon on her back to keep happy, another watching her from the shore. She was quite certain the Fury would be quick to point out any shortfalls in her technique, and her faults were, unfortunately, manifold.

* * *

><p>There had been buckles and leather bands, a process of fitting and adjusting. Hiccup asked her to move this way and that, to breath deep then shallow, to stretch out her wings and fold them again. Throughout it all he was shifting a strap here and a toggle there, quick fingers moving with practised ease. She felt strangely exposed as Hiccup moved around her body, his hands working seal oil into her scales as a guard against chafe, but he was businesslike about it, no fuss or fluster, just his regular saddling-up routine.<p>

Loki take him. Why did he have to be so calm and collected? Could it be that the young man, like his dragon, preferred her this way?

Still, Astrid had moved when he asked, her sole contribution to the procedure. She suffered it for Viggen's sake. And as Hiccup worked she tried to sense the flex of those unknown muscles, get used to her higher centre of gravity, find her balance on those great long legs. It was all she could do except obey instructions, watch him work and wonder at the dexterity she'd never again know for herself.

No more axe training. The weapon she'd spent years perfecting would grow dull and rusty, unless another warrior took to it. More likely it would be melted down, reforged into something better suited to a village at peace. Those graceful sweeps and thrusts, action and reaction as the blade moved to her will...soon they'd be no more than distant memories.

"You flame now. Flame better than axe."

Viggen stared up at her, confident and adoring. The ability to shield one's thoughts would come quickly, Hiccup had said. Astrid hoped he was right; she felt a desperate need for some time alone to figure things out. Well, to start figuring things out.

Before today she'd had her journal. Problems of the moment, issues large and small; anything she couldn't work out immediately or rationalise would get written down, pegged to the page, the uncertainty defined and contained. Then, when the mood took her, she'd go back to those entries and try again. Often she was left wondering what the problem had been in the first place.

She was fairly confident she wouldn't be doing much writing as a dragon. Perhaps she could teach Viggen to write. Her recent entries had been Nadder-dominated anyway; it would be oddly fitting for them to continue in Viggen's hand.

"Viggen learn."

And at that Astrid had to dip her head despite Hiccup's irritation, touch her nose to Viggen's hand, important then to acknowledge that

she could live without the axe, without the diary, if only Viggen would give her a moment to herself and then stay forever in her view, her bulwark against despair.

Abruptly Hiccup was done. Astrid stood tall, gingerly turned and twisted her body. Damn him for his competence; she could hardly feel the saddle at all.

She had entered that forest clearing as a naïve human. Now, less than a day later she would blunder out of it as a dragon, saddled and expected to fly when she could barely walk. She fixed her gaze on the far side of the glade, and stepped forward.

Hiccup was still being his irksome, practical self.

"The cove, I think. The lake's good for those, erm, first landing attempts..."

Viggen scuttled alongside, already suited up with Astrid's old harness and impatient to get going. If her companion shared any of her own turmoil, she wasn't letting it show.

* * *

><p>Their first tries were disasters, crash after shuddering crash. Viggen insisted on riding through all of it, right from the first ungainly take-off, shrugging off the risk and refusing to be separated from her ride.<p>

"Dragons must fly; soon, this you know. My place here."

Astrid's tail was surprisingly important for stability, and try as she might she couldn't manage the fine control needed. It frustrated her beyond imagining.

"_Small_ movements, like I said!"

_::I know, Viggen, I know...::__

They tumbled for the umpteenth time into the lake. Astrid righted herself in the shallows, crouching half-submerged as the silty water ran off her shoulders and wings. Necklaces of water-weed hung from her spines and she started to itch as the grit worked its way under her scales. She closed her eyes and tried to shut out the aches from her bruising thighs and neck.

Berk's best young warrior had turned into the world's worst dragon, and the sting of failure was unfamiliar and unsettling. Was this how Hiccup had felt, the mantle he'd worn, all through those long years past?

Viggen, completely unfazed, had no time for reflection.

"Again!"

Astrid rose up, shook herself off and spread her wings once more.

* * *

><p>Food in her belly was good. Hiccup had returned from the village with a creel of fish, and Astrid was still licking the slime from her teeth. Her appetite, if not her flight ability, was dragon through and through.<p>

The stony walls blurred past as she flew the low circuit of the cove on trembling wings. Her crashes seemed to be getting rarer, and the image-streams from Viggen helped.

::Wingtips flexed for bank, left up right down, horizon steady...::

Viggen had a good deal more confidence in their progress than Astrid, and wanted to go higher almost straight away. Astrid thought that just staying airborne was quite hard enough, thank you, and would have been content with some tethered practice of the sort Hiccup described from his early days with Toothless. Eventually they compromised on low, cautious turns, as slowly, so slowly, she learned the basics of control.

She began to sense the traction with the still air of the cove, started to feel the feedback from her wings to her brain and back again as she experimented with angles of attack on the downbeat, spilling wind on the upbeat, all the time trying to synchronise the power to left and right. She was starting to feel slightly better about this. Just very slightly.

And then, as the sun reached its low zenith, Viggen declared it was time to move out to the coast.

* * *

><p>Weeks of riding a dragon was no real preparation for being in charge of the wings and tail herself. Riding the coast breeze was exhilarating and scary and involving in ways she could never have imagined.

The spray caked her muzzle with salt and the gannets' cries crackled in her ears. They were high enough now for a fatal fall, if Astrid faltered. Enough of an incentive for her to concentrate on her flying, rather than brood on the events that had placed her dragon in her old body, clinging on atop her own now-scaly shoulders. Perhaps she'd learned enough in the cove to keep them both aloft, at least for now.

It was a fond hope.

She missed the tell-tale whiffle on the sea's face as they rounded a stack, and the gust immediately stalled her left wing. Astrid slid sideways in the fickle air and began to roll inverted. Panicked, and quickly losing height, she desperately spilled wind from her right and corrected with her tail; she crabbed back to some sort of level flight just above the waves, flapping and breathing hard.

"Why you let go the air? This _easy_. _Hatchling_ do this."

Viggen was developing a short fuse for the failures. For her part, Astrid was growing weary of her dragon's impatience.

::Viggen, I'm doing the best I can!::

She picked out Toothless and Hiccup as they kept watch on a far cliff, familiar paired silhouette, the two halves of a whole that defined the new world. She didn't properly understand all they'd been through together; could it possibly have been as hard as _this?_

"Enough. Let me in now. Viggen show."

::Let you in? And how do I do that, exactly?::

"Just trust, like before. Viggen show, you learn quick."

And there it was again, a snatch of that sly song tugging at her thoughts. But something snapped in Astrid then. She _could_ do this, given half a chance, and she needed to show it. She would do it in spite of the Fury's acid stare and Hiccup's cursed nonchalance. She understood that Viggen believed in her, but she would do this even without that touching faith, which by Astrid's reckoning wasn't even remotely deserved.

She just needed a moment alone to concentrate, to tether her mind to her new form, free of distraction.

::.**_No._**_ Not now. Viggen,_**_ let me be_**_.::_

Her thoughts returned to her axe and to Viggen's words about her flame, and suddenly realised that her dragon had been right. No, Viggen had been _more_ than right.

It wasn't just that Astrid's flame was better than her axe. Her new body _was_ the axe, hers to wield and control with just the same beauty and poise.

The wide sweep of her vision took in a world framed anew beneath glittering wings. Suddenly inspired, she held in mind an image of her new self, no shield-maiden now, but a picture of perfect blue-green symmetry gliding all alone between sea and sky, and limited by nothing at all.

She sated her lungs with the salt-heavy air, and drove her wings down hard. This time the wind welcomed her with a keen embrace. Clinging on above, Viggen howled with delight.

Astrid never let go of the air again.

* * *

><p>The young man and the Night Fury sat on the clifftop, watching with rapt concern as a distinctly erratic dragon-rider pair navigated Berk's rocky western coast.<p>

"What do you think, bud? Should we go help them?"

::No. Give them a bit longer yet.::

"You sure?"

::I am.::

The sudden image flashed through him with immediate and blinding priority. Stunned and disoriented, Hiccup flopped in an ungainly heap to the salty sward. Uncertain which way was up and which down, but knowing how perilously close he was to the cliff's edge, the young man tried to concentrate on feeling the springy, soggy turf beneath his palms. As his fingers wettened he dug them in, rooting himself to that spot.

Slowly, so very slowly, his swimming vision started to clear, the horizon adopting a vaguely horizontal position once more; and with that, the young man risked a sideways glance to his companion.

"Ttt... toothhh..."

The Fury had apparently fallen onto his side, and was now engaged in trying to regain his feet with as much dignity as he could muster. It didn't amount to very much.

::Hcup... y... you all right?::

"Yeah... yeah, I think so. You?"

Grunting in discomfort, Toothless settled to an ungainly squat.

::Getting there.:::

"Toothless... what the _Hel_ was that?"

::Don't look at me. It was new to me, too.:::

"What do you mean, new? Don't you know what just happened?"

::I really don't. But I think we just uncovered another gaping hole in your wonderful Dragon Manual.:::

"Oh great. My dragon has sarcasm, even when he can't stand up."

::What can I say? I learnt from the master.:::

"Oh, hilarious!"

Together they turned to look to the west once more, only to stare, bewildered, on the empty sea and the sky.

* * *

><p>They could have stayed out forever; had both wanted it. But eventually they swooped back in low over the waves, hit the updraft near the foot of the cliff and rode that vertical wind a hundred faÃ°mur up to the ledge where Hiccup and Toothless still stood. Astrid beat her wings to hover for a moment before dropping lightly to the sward. Viggen slid off, flung her arms around Astrid's neck and hugged her tight; Astrid just closed her eyes and stood there, oblivious to everything except being with Viggen, the caress of light fingers and the scent of sea-wrack and thyme that swirled all around them.

::Never more alone, yes? You stay in my view now.:::

"Won't be hard. You see far now."

Astrid's chuckle came out as more of a gurgle, but it was understood and welcomed. When she opened her eyes at last, she was surprised to see that Hiccup and the Fury had backed off a few paces.

::Huh. Thought I'd crash into you, I suppose?::

::That is not it.:::

Astrid noticed their matching stares, stares that were wide-eyed and not a little apprehensive. Hiccup stood stock still, and beside him, Toothless seemed lost for words. The Fury's wings hung loose at the shoulders, his tail twitching.

Their silence was unnerving.

::Well, what then?:::

"Astrid... you nearly spun out..."

She rounded on the young man, glaring, and all the spines along her tail rose up without conscious thought.

::But I didn't, did I?::

"No. No, you didn't. But right after that... we got..."

::We both got the same image. You, just you, gliding straight and level.:::

::Yeah, that was me. That was my image. I suppose I sent it, too. So what? Images, words... dragons use whichever fits best, right?::

::There was power behind that image, Astrid. I've never had anything so strong from another dragon. Not from that distance. And when we looked again... well...:::

Astrid stomped her foot, hard enough to shake the turf.

::Will you please just tell me ****what is going on?**_**?::_

But they never got the chance, because in that moment, just off to one side, the very air seemed to swirl and thicken, quickly growing darker and denser, assuming outline, then solidity, then mass.

A medium-sized dragon, all black, with glorious shining wings and scales. Exasperation shone out of her citrine eyes.

::By Ryǿjin, you Berk dragons don't do anything by halves, do you?::

::****You!**_**?::_

* * *

><p>Chapter 3 endnotes:

It's not giving anything away to say that the new Fury is the same

one from chapter 4 of Learning Curve. And if you think Toothless has attitude, this girl makes him look like a pussycat.

4. Chapter 4

****Chapter 4****

****AN:**** The first, brief meeting between Toothless and Melisma is described in my earlier story 'Learning Curve'.

* * *

><p>She was not like him; this much was obvious. In fact, from the tattoos that swirled round her neck and shoulders, to the curious gleam that edged every one of her scales, she was clearly not even from around Berk.<p>

But Toothless knew cosmetics when he saw them. He was much more interested in the newcomer's longer, thinner wings, her deeper torso, the powerful muscles bunched and corded in such strange configurations. Her legs were slender and her fins slight and sleek, knives to the air. She was a Night Fury all right, but in a form fully optimised for flight.

And she had caught him staring.

::Like what you see, Fury?::

She snapped her wings out, angled them just so to the wind, and without more ado ghosted up from the sward. Her legs seemed to vanish as she tucked them in, her body impossibly streamlined. As if hanging on some invisible cord she clung there on the breeze, motionless, just off the ground. Never had Toothless seen such beautiful control.

::Nice air off the cliffs here. One of the perks of this posting...?::

The new Fury's sensors fell back flat. She shut her eyes, sighed, and sank back to a feather-light four-point touchdown. When her eyes opened again, they were those of a dragon completely set on business, and no pleasure at all.

::Well, alright. Introductions, I suppose. Name's Melisma, Vigilant to these airs, last five sun-cycles. I've already met your Famous Damaged One here; and you're Hiccup. Which means you two must be Viggen and Astrid, yes?::

Words would not come for any of the friends. They could only gawp and nod slowly as she turned back to Toothless and Hiccup.

::I'm sorry to rush things, but time's short. I need to know what you saw. These two were firstflighting, right?::

Hiccup's mouth had gone as dry as the ashes in yesterday's hearth. He licked his lips, swallowed hard, and finally found his voice.

"Errrm, yeah. We were watching them... got a flash of something

strong, all of a sudden, just Astrid here gliding along on her own. Blinded us for a bit..."

He paused, but Melisma would brook no hesitation.

::Yes, yes, come on...::

"Well, when we could see again, Astrid and Viggen had... gone. Just vanished. Only picked 'em up again right before you showed up."

Melisma's eyes went to slits. She thrashed her tail and spat an angry gob of plasma at the turf.

_::Damned amateurs! Weeks of painstaking work watching you lot, all wasted because you have to go and pull a stunt like that! Every dragon on Berk got that image. As for the thinskins... well, who can guess what _**_they_**_ saw. Whole village is spooked. What a _**_mess!_**_::_

She seemed to collect herself then, subside a little from her ire, but any onlooker would sense that her irritation was only barely contained. She took a deep breath and sighed out heavily.

::Well, there's no helping it now. From your blank expressions I take it none of you have any idea what just happened? What really happened?::

Astrid edged up to Viggen - to bolster her own confidence or to protect her mate, she wasn't really sure - before replying.

::Errrr, nope. Still getting used to being a Nadder, thanks for asking. Oh, and you appearing out of thin air.::

"Astrid wanted _alone_. I wanted to help."

Melisma turned to Viggen with a kindlier eye.

_::Oh, my little friend, forgive my harsh words. To have what you and Astrid have now... it's the stuff of dreams, to me and those like me. And you _**_did_**_ help Astrid, more than you can know.::_

"Wait, wait. 'Those like me', you said."

Melisma glanced across at Hiccup, eyes bright, amused at his confusion.

::Well of course, Hiccup. Oh, don't look so shocked! Your precious Northern lands aren't the only ones to be blessed with dragons, you know.::

Dark wings flapped idly in Hiccup's face.

::See these? They imply a certain mobility, wouldn't you say? Of course we're everywhere! We're just not noticed, that's all.::

Incredulous and mesmerised all at once, Berk's foremost dragon expert suddenly felt like a hatchling Terror in a nest full of Nightmares. But Melisma's next words snapped him back to more immediate

concerns.

::No time to explain now. There's a village of humans and dragons just about ready to fall apart back there.::

"Oh, gods! Toothless, Astrid, Viggen, c'mon!" In a blink he was up on Toothless' harness, clipping in. But Melisma's wings were out again, blocking any take-off, demanding attention.

::Wait, Hiccup. Wait a moment, and think. How much do the other humans know? About dragons?::

The young man hesitated. Somehow he felt that admitting the truth - that most of the villagers regarded the dragons as little more than glorified pets - would not be well received. And how could he pass any comment when his own knowledge was clearly so incomplete? It seemed likely that anything he said now would merely anger her further.

He decided to try conciliation. "Err... well, the killing's stopped, if that's what you mean."

She shot him a vicious look, pupils slitted, sensors flattened against her head. Toothless' muscles tensed under the young man's thighs.

::Don't try my patience, Hiccup, not now. Is there any talking going on? Apart from you four?::

He frowned back at her. This, at least, he could answer. "No, not yet. Astrid was the first, after me. It's just too soon for the rest of them."

::Uh huh. No argument there. So, how's this going to go? 'Hi Dad! Guess what! Dragon's aren't what you thought they were. Oh and by the way, Astrid's a Nadder now. Will you tell the Hoffersons, or shall I?'::

Toothless and Hiccup exchanged rueful looks. Then Hiccup, his voice low:

"I think I like your sarcasm better than hers, bud."

::Well, of course you do. But she does have a point.::

Viggen piped up again, all brightness and confidence. Apparently, the solution was both obvious and within easy reach.

"Viggen pretend. Pretend to be Astrid."

But at those words Astrid's attention flared, notions of danger and images of hurt to Viggen flooding her mind. She turned sadly, nosing her mate as gently as she could.

::No, no, my sweet. It wouldn't work. Maybe in time, but not now. You'd need to practice. Like me and flying.::

Viggen's shoulders fell, every trace of optimism and alertness vanished away. The look that replaced it was disconsolate, defeated. With a jolt, Astrid realised she'd seen this sudden change before.

Many times before, in fact.

It was the look that a Nadder would wear for an instant when, cornered and out of fire, it faced the final axe-fall.

_::No Viggen, no!:: _

And in that moment Astrid realised, with a sharp and terrible certainty, just how selfish she'd been. She was so focussed on her own transformation, so content to draw on Viggen's strength and resilience, that she'd quite forgotten what her mate must also have been going through. Reduced to this wingless form, daring to imagine a new life for them both, and all the while blaming herself for inflicting... well, all of this on her friend. Dragons also had their limits, it seemed, and Viggen had reached hers.

Astrid couldn't find the words to tell of her remorse. But an image leapt to her mind readily enough. She held it there for a moment, turned it round and around, checking for rough edges. Then she let Viggen take it from her mind.

_::Calm seas, calm summer skies. Astrid and Viggen dancing in the cumulus, bright wings and laughter...:: _

Her companion looked up at her, quizzical, still doubtful.

"Easy to get lost, those kinds of clouds..."

_::But I'll have a navigator. 'Never more alone', remember?:: _

And Viggen replied, encouraged, and with less darkness to her features now:

"Told you we'd find a way."

* * *

><p>"What do you mean, leave?"<p>

Hiccup had dismounted and stood now close up against Toothless, one arm over his friend's stocky neck, while Melisma paced round and around on the turf. At the young man's query she whirled to face him, sensors up, eyes intense and level with his.

_::Just for a spell. Need to get rid of some uncertainty. No other course to take.:: _

"My father won't hurt us! And I can talk to the others, explain things..."

But she was resolute, her tone warning against further challenge.

_::Maybe it'd work and maybe it wouldn't. I'm not prepared to risk it. Not one more dragon's life, Hiccup, not another human's. Especially not now, when you're all so close.:: _

Her yellow eyes looked him up and down with such piercing deliberation that Hiccup felt suddenly vulnerable, despite the powerful companion at his side. But eventually Melisma sat back on

her haunches, apparently having come to some sort of decision.

::Tell me Hiccup... do you like stories?::

Once again he was thrown onto the back foot.

"What? Stories? Well sure, when I was younger, I mean..."

::Then I would tell you such a tale, one fitting for your ears and few besides. But it demands the proper time and place, and we have neither now. We need some distance from your village for a while, hard as it will be.::

A foreclaw extended towards his chest. Instantly Toothless snarled, threw his weight onto his hinds in readiness to rear up, slash and bite.

::Oh, be still, Fury. I mean him no harm.::

Gently she prodded the front of Hiccup's tunic.

::Ah good, you've got it. Take out your notebook, Hiccup. You've got a letter to write.::

"Write?"

::Yes, Hiccup, write. You know. That clever thing you humans do with your hands.::

* * *

><p>The twilight was nearly spent when they flew up to land just beyond the nearest houses. Peering out from the woodland's cover, Hiccup gasped at the sight of dwellings reduced to ashes. Vikings were yelling, scurrying about with buckets of sand and water, damping down the last of the fires while the dragons hung around in restless knots, their uncontrolled imaging rife with tension and anxiety.<p>

::Fire our fault, humans upset, remembering humans with swords and axes....::

Melisma surveyed the scene, wrinkling her nose in the acrid smoke.

_::Huh. Could be worse. Just some twitchy _brannbomber_ too close to buildings when Astrid did her thing.::_

The last flames went out, and the village was swallowed in darkness. Upon the instant, Melisma turned to Hiccup and Toothless.

::Go.::

They slid down among the houses, no more than oily shadows quickly enfolded by the night. You could peer hard, blink and peer again, and still you'd miss them. But of a moment, out of the edge of vision, you might catch just a hint of something shifting in that midwinter black, flitting here, and here, and there.

But only if you knew something was moving there in the first place.

* * *

><p>"Hiccup! There you are! Been missin' you, son. Could've done with your help earlier on. Hiccup, this afternoon, our dragons just... well, they just went berserk..."<p>

"I know Dad, I know."

"...an' now they've all up an' left! What's goin' on, son?"

Hiccup looked back at his father from his dragon's shoulders, shoulders that were staunch and steady and which somehow gave him the strength to hold back the panic surging up inside him. His father didn't seem to think it odd that he stayed mounted. And Hiccup was grateful that, in the smoky dark, his father hadn't noticed his backpack, or the bulging saddlebags strapped either side of Toothless' harness.

The young man steeled himself for the conversation to come.

Ever since the Queen's downfall he'd hoped for some change in the villagers' understanding of dragons, but as the weeks slipped by he began to realise that the shift he longed for just wasn't going to happen on its own. True, the villagers had settled for a new outlook on the world, and it was one that placed dragons in a much more favourable light. Living with the scaled beasts had seemed crazy to the Berkers at first, but once they saw the practical benefits, a new normality had quickly taken hold.

The villagers thought they understood dragons. And in this they were, of course, utterly mistaken.

Hiccup supposed he should feel grateful; after centuries of killing, dragons and humans now prospered together. But for the villagers to share their daily lives with impressive, useful animals was one thing; for them to see dragons for their true selves was quite another. Hiccup dreaded that their new perspective would turn out to be just as damaging as the one it had replaced.

And so for weeks he'd been planning for this time, thinking of all the calm and considered words he'd speak to his father, waiting for the most auspicious moment. But he'd also plotted out elaborate contingencies, alternative plans if it should all go wrong. He'd talked it all through with Toothless, feeling quite the traitor as he did so, even knowing that he had no real choice in the matter at all. But now that the moment was thrust upon him, all of those measured sentences, the veneer of presentation on which he'd pinned so much hope, just vanished from his mind. All that remained was the naked truth, and it was stark indeed.

Hiccup looked down again to his father. The older man was grimed head to toe with soot, his red mane singed and tangled, and he reeked of sweat. Was this the last image he'd carry of his father into exile?

But the dragons came first for Hiccup. Would always come

first.

"They left because I told them that they must."

* * *

><p>Thin billows of ash and smoke drifted veil-like between father and son. Stoick just stood there, uncomprehending, but with a dread sense that the fabric of his world was unravelling once again. Just when he thought he'd done a halfway-decent job of stitching it back together.<p>

Did he mishear his son? No, the words had been quite clear. Perhaps Hiccup had lost his mind? Guiltily, Stoick shut out the possibility. His son's gaze was quite calm and contained no hint of mania.

And yet, and yet, the implications of those words...

Standing there as his village smouldered behind him, Stoick suddenly recalled a similar moment with Hiccup. He'd rejected his son then. Now, in this otherworldly midwinter night, he was poised to fail him for a second time.

Recently Stoick had been thinking long and hard about his actions before the Queen's downfall. So many mistakes, so many lives lost, so much time wasted. And at those times of reflection it seemed to the chief that there was precious little to be said in favour of his advancing years, save perhaps the chance to learn from his mistakes, to make better judgements the next time around. To be a better chief. A better father.

Perhaps the gods were challenging him now. But if so, then why with such curious grace and generosity? Completely undeserving and with time not on his side, Stock the Vast was being given another chance to make things right.

And still the words choked him. Eventually, Hiccup spoke again.

"They are people, Dad. They think, they feel, just like us..."

"Hiccup..."

"...and Toothless here can understand every word that you say."

Stoick forced his eyes to meet the Fury's. The beast cocked its head slightly, sensors up, attentive but unthreatening. It... no, he... he held the chief's gaze with calm deliberation.

A few images fell into place for Stoick then.

A Night Fury poised to kill, but restrained from wrath by Hiccup's pleas...

The Fury and his son flying to defeat a demon, a perfect mesh of intent and action that spoke of shared planning and matched intelligence...

And at the last, his son rendered back to him by this dragon, on utterance of the simplest words of pure remorse.

Gods, please, not to fail again. But, oh gods, could his son's words really carry the truth?

"Hiccup... I don't want to lose you again..."

And then, against all odds, his son just smiled calmly back at him, honest and warm. Stoick was overwhelmed; it was a response more welcome to the chief than ever he could have hoped for.

"You won't. But there's something more."

A Nadder emerged hesitantly from the gloom with faltering gait. A familiar human in a familiar saddle sat astride its shoulders, leaning forward with one arm pressed tight across the dragon's neck as if in embrace. The rider might have been drawing strength or giving it; Stoick couldn't fathom.

The young woman clutched a folded paper tight in her other fist. A fist that now extended slowly towards him.

"Chief Stoick."

The voice was Astrid's, but the timbre seemed strange. She said no more. Stoick took the letter, having almost to prise it from her grasp. The outer leaf carried but a single word, pencil-written in Hiccup's clear hand: Hofferson.

"Hiccup?... Astrid?..."

Two pairs of dragon wings were already stretched wide.

"Dad, I promise you... you will see us again. And all the dragons, too."

And then the chief was alone, save for the swirling ash caught up in the downstrokes.

* * *

><p>::Primary attack and defence mode. All hatchlings learn this, before they can fly. Come now, Hiccup; did you really think dragons were all about the wings and the claws and the fire?::

Another winter's night, another woodland glade and campfire, but this one safely removed from Berk. Distant Atlantic rollers thundered on basalt, an offbeat emphasis to each of Melisma's phrases. Perhaps no humans had stepped before now upon this remote cliff-girt island, crowned with its birch and rowan scrub, and set all alone in the Northern sea.

"What? All dragons can turn invisible?"

Melisma shot him a withering glance.

::I think you must have lost a bit of your brains with along with your foot, Hiccup. Of course we can't turn invisible. We just make it easier for others to... overlook us. When we want to. And yes, all

dragons can do this. Except your lot round here.::_

Incredulous, Hiccup leant back on his dragon. That dark body was a deep comfort, whether or not it could vanish at will.

"So why are they special? Why can't Berk dragons do this... this... thing?"

::_Shadowing. It's called Shadowing. And as for the Berk dragons... well, you and Toothless just killed the reason they can't do it.::_

"The Queen!"

::_None other. She held back the minds of dragons here for hundreds of sun-cycles. Generations of dragons living and dying under her spell, never knowing what they'd lost.::_

Toothless swung his head to her gaze.

::_But my clan! Other clans near here! They were never enslaved!::_

::_Where were you hatched and raised, O Damaged One? Your clan, which airs do they claim?::_

Toothless growled back at her. _::_Lofoten.::_

::_Well then. Far enough away to escape her enslavement, but close enough for her to suppress your minds; not by much, but enough. And even with her gone, what way back? No easy matter to learn a skill lost for so long to your clan.::_

"You could have shown yourself before now. Taught the Berk dragons anew. Why didn't you?"

For the first time, Melisma hesitated. She averted her gaze, avoiding Hiccup's eyes. Avoided all of their glances.

::_I could have. It was discussed. But there were other considerations as well, and we decided to hold back. I regret that decision very much.::_

She paused, letting them absorb it.

::_But as it turns out, Astrid and Viggen discovered Shadowing all by themselves.::_

"Don't understand. How we do this?"

::_You said it yourself, Viggen. Astrid wanted to be alone, powerfully so. And so she did what dragons do when they don't want to be seen. She made an image of herself being alone, sent it out. That's how Shadowing's done, at the heart of it anyway. But it should not have been enough, not without the proper training. Somehow, the two of you, dragon and human... it's as if you made your own tailwind for Astrid's Shadow-image. Together, you flung it out a great distance and made it look **easy**.::_

::_I still don't get it. You said we did the opposite to hiding

ourselves! Spooked the village, you said!:_

::I said you had range and power. I didn't say you had finesse. It's all about control, Astrid. Control it right and no-one will see your image, or be aware of your mind or body at all. As if they had a blind spot, exactly your shape and size. They just... won't notice you.::

* * *

><p>The embers faded as the long night wore on. Viggen lay curled up under Astrid's wing; it had taken a few tries, but eventually the pair had found a configuration that was comfortable for both of them. It hadn't helped when Viggen insisted on curling an arm, wing-like, up over her head before she'd close her eyes. Toothless smiled when he saw it; some of the Nadder ways died hard, it seemed. Hiccup also had dozed off, slumped against his shoulder in his habitual way, head nodding and snoring quietly. The Fury knew he'd have to wake him before long, encourage his partner to find a blanket and seek a wing's shelter. The young man was always grumpy about it, but better that than a frozen Hiccup come morning.<p>

In the small hours the two Furies kept vigil, separated by the dying fire, and as its glow ebbed away Toothless found it harder to avoid the other's eyes. A hundred questions bubbled around in his mind, but he kept his silence. Despite their brief acquaintance, he knew well enough that Melisma would speak only when she was good and ready.

Eventually the patterned dragon's eyes shifted from the dying coals to the Nadder-human pair. For long moments she gazed upon them, and it seemed to Toothless that she might be fixing this image in her mind, convincing herself of its veracity, lest on cooler daytime reflection it might resolve as no more than a wonderful dream. Many and varied had been her skies, Toothless had no doubt. Yet here, tonight, was something new and entrancing to this world-wise Fury, she of the knife-fins and the lime-edged scales.

::Will they be all right, you think?::

She was still staring wide-eyed at Astrid and Viggen as if nothing else existed in her world. In fact, Toothless wasn't even sure she was really addressing him at all. But for once there was no caustic humour or sting of criticism in her voice, nor yet on her face. And so, Toothless thought, he would keep his reply equally measured.

::Who can say for certain? Strange new skies these. But humans are tougher than I used to think. They learn, they'll adapt; they're rather like us, in that way.::

Something more occurred to him, then.

::Astrid was a strong human; in some ways, the strongest I ever knew. I think some of that rubbed off on Viggen. At any rate, I hope it did.::

::They did well today, Toothless. All of them.:: A slow blink then, reflecting._: That thinskin of yours... he really is quite something, isn't he?::_

Her tone carried only genuine praise, and such words from this dragon warmed Toothless' innards in a way his violet flame never could. He couldn't help it; he dipped his head to Hiccup's neck, licked briefly there, sure and certain mark of his devotion. He really didn't care one bit if she was watching.

And he also decided then to open up, just slightly, to this strange new Fury. By her own admission she still had a lot of storytelling to do, and Toothless meant to keep her to it.

::He has his moments,:: he conceded, noncommittal._ ::Mainly they involve those nimble little fingers. Not sure I could manage without those scratches anymore.::_

An unreadable expression on her face, then.

::Huh... well, I really couldn't comment. But speaking of good feelings...::

She reached to one side, snagged a saddlebag out of the pile and rummaged inside with dextrous claws.

::Ah!::

A small leather pouch appeared, and Toothless recognised it immediately. He stared back at her, eyes wide in shock.

::That's Gobber's!::

::Hmmm? Oh, the two-limb, you mean? Yes, the leaf is a great balm to him, I think. Those old hurts still cut him deep. Oh, I'll return it, don't worry. And full of better than this poor weed.::

From the pouch she drew out a wad of the dried hemp-stuff. She rolled a ball of it under her forepaw, impaled it on a claw and popped it into her mouth. A moment later, clouds of sweet-smelling, bluish smoke rolled out of her nostrils.

::Want some?::

In his admittedly brief exposure, Toothless had never come to care much for the humans' strange-smelling weed. It seemed to dull their speech and reason, and he valued his own faculties too much to risk it. But it seemed rude to refuse this invitation. He gave a curt nod, and Melisma sent a couple of smoke-rings over to him.

::So what's it like, my fine Damaged One? When you touch with Hiccup's mind... tell me, what does it feel like then?::

Toothless paused. The question was unexpected, and it went further than he felt comfortable with, certainly at this point. But it seemed that his reply was the price of learning more about this strange newcomer, and Toothless was curious indeed.

So he considered for a moment how best to convey it. The weed-smoke wasn't helping at all.

_::In some ways, it still feels so raw and new. I guess we're still learning a lot about each other. Changing each other too, and that

part scares me plenty. But if I were to lose him now... well, I just don't want to think about it.::_

It wasn't enough. He hadn't captured it at all, not by any means; the new realms that had opened up for the two of them, together... the sense of completeness that only Hiccup's company could bring.

Thoughts of his first meeting with Melisma drifted back to him then. She'd extolled him in cutting tones that still burned in his memory: _::Think, dragon, think! What are Night Furies good at?::_

...the most respected of healers...

And there it was.

::There was a time with my parents once. It was a young Fury, grown enough for firstflight but blind from the egg. We were asked to help, if we could. It was difficult... we were at it for days. But in the end, we prevailed.::

The rapture and awe in that young dragon's mind as it rolled out over the three of them, wave after unstoppable wave. Toothless thought he'd never feel that good again. And nor did he, until he met the boy.

The recollection seemed to satisfy her, at least somewhat.

::Yes. Yes, I too have taken part in such Healings. I know the joy they can bring.::

She drew deeply on the smoke, then sent it up towards the stars.

:: I envy you, Toothless. You, Hiccup, and those two over there.::

::But you could know this for yourself! Are you not tempted to find such a human? If not in Berk, then elsewhere?::

Another pause.

::Tempted, oh yes indeed. But remind me, Toothless... how was it achieved? You and Hiccup, Viggen and Astrid, how did you manage it? Through song, was it not?::

::Well, yes. But common songs, such as all dragons know.::

A despondent look from her then.

::Common songs; I see. But even so, I fear I shall never find a human mate.::

It made no sense to Toothless. Surely her songs would be the most lyrical, the most harmonious...

::But your name! For you of all dragons, there should be no difficulty in finding such a song!::

But suddenly there it was, the prick of an old, old memory, a story from his hatchling days, tales of a clan long since faded into

myth.

::Oh... oh, but wait now...::

The abject sadness in her face was all the confirmation he needed at that point. Toothless' eyes widened in awe.

::You're one of the Counternamed, aren't you?::

She smiled back sadly at him.

::No song would ever hold for me, try as I might. 'Tone-deaf', I believe the thinskins call it. No, my fine Damaged One. I fear my own tuneless ditties will never tempt a human mate.::

5. Chapter 5

****Chapter 5****

****AN:**** please see endnote for word listing.

* * *

><p>They sleep soundly now, the maimed ones and my mate and the strange new darkling of patterned hide and subtle flight. Their thoughts are muted, their breathing deep and measured. But I'm awake, heart stirring and mind alert in the predawn glow. To rouse at this time was always the wont of my kind.<p>

At this moment and far off from here my noust will be waking, a tail slipping over a sister's belly, perhaps a leg shifting across a cousin's flank. Snorts and the comfortable rasp of scales on spines. It's fun to be the first of the skyldfÃ³lk awake, to track the others as they begin to stir. One's mind is almost void of colour at first, just those faint wispy tendrils of light that speak of dragons easy in their sleep. Who will be first this morning?

Perhaps a flicker of ruby light, steadying to a strong, regular pulse: ah, that's my younger sister, tucked in on my left, her usual spot. I lift my wing from her head and she blinks, then stretches out to touch her snout to mine. Then it's my cousin away behind me, ever cheerful, a blaze of zesty yellow that's undimmed in the heaviest rain. Loud and brash he is, and he sparks off most of the rest, a rainbow of shining colours that throb and fade, mingle and spread, getting harder to separate. But my brother's creamy azure is so distinctive and he's always the last, sleepy head that he is.

We're all up now, the colours settling back to the familiar background hue and flow. I've known it all my life, backdrop to all our daily tasks and thoughts while we're together. The sinnljÃ³s we call it, mind-light of the clan, special to us and us alone. It's who we are.

The light will be different, the clan altered, now that I am gone. And already I miss them desperately.

They'll be stretching wings and legs now, hungry for the fogrie flight while the fish are near the surface, tastier in this hour than

at any other. Up into the air and I can see myself right there with them, climbing and forming up on my brother's wing; once again he's to the fore of our nine-strong V, just as he prefers. Turbulence spins away from his right wingtip and onto my left, the disturbed air easing my flight as we cross the coast. And then we quieten our thoughts, the better to pick up the feeble twitter of the fogrie, and prepare to take them in the way we like the best.

We've found a shoal, just off the islet, and in just the right depth. There can be no escape for these fish now. My brother, cousin and I fold wings and hurtle in, a threefold impact that stuns the entire shoal. Our fellows glide in at their leisure, skim up the fish as they pass, easy as you please. My turn to feed will be next...

...but not this morning. Instead I'm here on this wooded isle, mocked by the dull tumble of the breakers. The glow rises strongly in the east now, I'm sure of it. But I can't see it. My mate's wing shrouds me, shielding my feeble frame from the cold. Reluctant to wake her, resigned to the dark, I reach up and trace the lines of web and rib that shift gently above me, rising and falling with her every breath.

She'll learn to fish for herself, given time. But I don't think this body will be joining hers on those forays. This thin skull, these fragile bones... they wouldn't endure it.

What would my old fÃ³lk make of us now? Would they accept my mate and I? Or should the two of us start over, a clan of two, a new light shining out for all to see?

Viggen she named me, and lightning she says it means in the airs to the east, in SviarÃ³ki. Sky-bright flash here and gone, rumble of threat or a warning to come. Another and an older name I knew, but I don't care to remember it, for I am Viggen to her now, strong hard burst of light to blind her enemies and brighten all her days.

Marked her out and claimed her as mine I did, first to kill, then in flight, and now forever. Only now do I see she was right there with me, every step. How could I know my song would sound so strong? Or did she fly up to meet me halfway in that endeavour, too? A parent dragon will soar out to meet a firstflight youngster, companion for a safe glide back to welcome shores. I think Astrid was singing along with me, finishing all my phrases, right from the very start.

Chafe and soreness and the start of callus along my thighs, outward marks of a dragon rider. Astrid must have had these hurts for weeks, but never a grumble. I know now that I was changing this frail body even before my song was sung.

I run my weak, blunt claws... no, fingers... again over the strange weavings that wrap around me, so curiously shaped to my form. The textures are unfamiliar, make my pale skin itch. My Astrid says I need these coverings for warmth and for something she calls 'decency'. They certainly soil quickly; lake-grime, salt and soot have stuck to my clothes and skin, and licking to clean them doesn't seem to work. I don't like it. I was always clean before.

Memories of yesterday swarm now in my mind. I am staring up at my old

form from below, strange new curves and angles, all fangs and feet to a thinskin's eye. Have to crane my neck, turn my head this way and that for the full view. Old body still handsome enough; some damage here and there of course, price of our training. Spoil her good looks for a spell till the scales regrow. But still shiny from a ways off.

Clean, shiny scales. My Astrid loved to polish them, rag of cloth and fine sand to work between, clean out the grime till I sparkled in that beyond-the-blue gleam that's in her vision now, just as it's lost to mine. But I'll clean these same scales for her, just as soon as I get these hands sorted out.

Fingers flex in place of wings, poor substitute. But I watched, rapt, as Hiccup took out that thin sharp twig, held it just so, somehow made it mark the pale leaves with those strange lines as Astrid spoke in his mind. The marks are her words caught and held, she said, to those with the proper training. I tried to hold the twig like Hiccup but, unlike the dirt, it wouldn't stick.

The lightest touch in my thoughts, soft as willow catkins or whisper of wind on a sl tta sea. My mate is stirring at last.

My clan will be on return flight soon, swift and silent and low over the breakers, bellies full. But only now does my mate's wing lift from over me as she grumbles awake. A drab and baleful dawn has already been and gone.

I've missed the glow.

* * *

><p>Endnote

Words from the old Viking lands are still very common in Orkney and Shetland, lending a distinct sound and feel to the dialects of these islands. So as an experiment, I included some in this chapter:

noust - a common shoreline feature in the Northern Isles, a noust is a natural hollow or scooped out trench above a beach, used to secure and shelter a boat. Nadders use the word to mean the location of their communal night-time shelter; it's also the collective noun for a clan group of Nadders using such a shelter. (Shetland dialect)

skyldf  lk - kinsfolk; kin (Faeroe)

sinn - mind (Faeroe)

lj  s - light (Faeroe)

fogrie - mackerel (Shetland dialect)

Viggen - lightning (from vigg + en, Sweden, 13th to 16th centuries)

Sviar  ki - Sweden (Faeroe)

sl tta - calm; smooth (Old Norse)

6. Chapter 6

****Chapter 6****

"Astrid."

She rolled over in her cot, tugging the blankets tighter. It was the middle of the night, and until a moment ago she'd been sound asleep. Was someone really calling her? Whoever it was better have good cause, or she'd know the reason why.

To wake a body at this hour was just downright uncivilised.

"Astrid?"

She liked it here, upstairs in the Hofferson house. Her father had done well in his fur trading, and had used some of his profits to fit out this fine loft for his elder daughter. The room stayed cozy long into the night, lined as it was with good pitch pine from Berk's deep forests, and warmed by the fire that burned day-long in the living room below. Scents from the fire, resinous softwoods and peat smoke, wafted up to her quarters. For some reason the smells of home were oddly pungent this morning.

Still, right now she couldn't think of anywhere she'd rather be than here between these covers, snug and secure. Whoever was calling her and whatever they wanted, five more minutes wouldn't do any harm.

"Astrid!"

Perhaps that imp of a sister was calling her. If so, she must have slept in. But it wasn't like her; she'd always been one to knuckle down, get her housework out of the way, the better to spend her time in weapons training or hunting. These days, of course, there was also the matter of flight lessons for the new riders, and that meant long hours in Viggen's company. And with this happy prospect she was applying herself to finishing her household tasks still faster.

Ah, those hours in flight when the training was done, just Viggen and her and the endless sky...

"WAKE UP!"

Someone was prodding with insistent fingers in her side. And as if that wasn't enough, there in the dark room, bright flashes of turquoise suddenly flickered across the whole of her vision. What in _Hel's name _was going on?

But before she could get properly angry, another voice came to her. It was a voice whose urgency couldn't be ignored, speaking as it did directly in her mind.

::ASTRID!::

The comforting, familiar environs of Berk, the drudgery of housework and the anticipation of riding her dragon again vanished in an instant as she shuddered properly awake, her senses finally coming

alive to her surroundings.

And then she remembered that very little about her life could be called familiar any more.

Astrid lifted a wing and out scrambled a very irritated Viggen who, if her temper was anything to go by, had already been awake for a considerable while.

"About time!"

The once-dragon stalked over to where Hiccup had a fire lit. Without a single backwards glance to her mate she grabbed one of the roasted herring by its spit and tore into the fish with all the gusto her still-clumsy hands could manage.

Astrid blinked. The sun's low light barely penetrated the morning haar, reducing the scrubby trees around her to little more than shady, monochrome skeletons. It was utterly still; the smoke from the fire barely diffused at all as it spiralled upwards. She noticed that she was the last of the group awake, but by merciful chance the others were all giving her a wide berth.

Or perhaps, she thought, it wasn't chance at all.

Astrid heaved herself onto cramping legs and shook off the worst of the dust. Bruises and aching muscles made themselves known, knots of discomfort running down her thighs and across her shoulders. Wincing at the pain she drew herself up tall, gingerly stretched out one wing then the other to full spread, relieved to find both of them still fit for purpose. Despite the dull throb of her injuries she thought her stance was more confident this morning. Her companions seemed strangely small as she looked down on them from her full height.

Hers was a Nadder's body. She had two great, sharp-clawed feet on long, powerful legs, promise of great speed on the ground. Torso deep and stocky, dense-packed with flight muscles massively banded from sternum to shoulder. A heavy, horned head on a too-slender neck, mighty jaws with fangs that seemed far too long for any practical use. The quilled tail that had so horrified her the previous morning she now saw for what it really was, a counterbalance to the beat of her wings in flight and to each of her strides on the ground.

She'd spent the last day in a state of constant bewilderment and disorientation. It had started with Viggen's song, opening the floodgates in her mind. Then came her new speech and understanding, beckoning to a world of dragons and their ways she'd never dared imagine before. The shock of finding herself reformed with scales and wings, redoubled with the discovery of Viggen's mirror change. Learning to fly; strange new dragons that could appear and vanish on a whim. And, oh gods, her own ability to Shadow-image awakened in a moment of chance euphoria, curse or blessing yet to be determined.

Really, she supposed, she was coping all right. As well as anyone might. All things considered.

She was doing all right. She could allow herself to acknowledge that much. She could hold her head up high.

It was a strangely liberating thought. Standing there erect with new-found pride, she drew deeply on the cold dawn air. The myriad scents of the island, both keen and subtle, were so clearly separated to her now. She took them all in with relish, along with the bright new colours in the wide sweep of her vision, along with every minute squeak, twitter and rustle of small things that scurried and fled. Her new senses coalesced into a single, coherent stream of information that made complete sense of her surroundings, connected her to the world in a way that was as exciting as it was novel. There was certainly a lot for Astrid to like about her new senses.

But no, she realised. There was more to it than that.

There was a lot for her to prefer.

The notion hit her forcibly, and she froze dead on the spot. She couldn't deny the idea, and with a kind of awful inevitability she dared to let it sink in, to strengthen its hold. As the realisation gradually took her, she directed her sight to the appendage that had so revolted her the day before. Without even needing to turn her head, she let her gaze linger once again on her tail.

It didn't disgust her this morning. She saw now that it was part of the package that comprised her new body, senses and thoughts. It was, she suddenly recognised, a package she could work with. It contained possibilities, promised new challenges and new paths of learning that demanded to be opened up and mastered. And ideas like those were of very particular interest to Astrid.

Fighting back the strangeness of the feeling, she dared to consider that she might... prefer this package.

She thought back. Until now, had there been a single moment when she'd thought of trying to reclaim her old body? If so, she couldn't remember it. But then, everything had happened so very fast.

Well then, could she pin down when she first began to feel less dissatisfied... even at ease with this new form?

There was no doubt about that. It had been the moment when she first bent the airs of Berk to her will, confident that her wings wouldn't falter. The same moment in which Viggen saw the truth of the change in her and screamed out in ecstasy for her mate. The same moment when her Shadow-image exploded out raw and uncontrolled, sparking the village dragons to riot. What she'd sensed then was closer to a feeling of pure fulfilment than anything she had ever known.

The moment had in some way defined her. And with that knowledge clear in her mind, Astrid decided her preference right there and then. The certainty of it dazzled her, permitting no thoughts of her family back on Berk, of her old duties. Or even, for that moment, of what Viggen might make of her choice.

There was a great Northern sea near the crown of the world. And somewhere in those high latitudes, caught between tide-rip and storm lay the island of Berk. Proud Vikings farmed, fished, lived and loved there. A blond-haired fighting girl had once lived there too, as one of them.

And somewhere else in that wide sea was another, smaller island, really quite ordinary. It was un-named on any chart. Well away from the cliff's edge there happened to be a smallish glade set amid some hardwood scrub. On any other morning the setting would be completely unremarkable.

But on this morning there stood in that glade a creature born anew, suddenly unabashed of her new form and unashamed of feeling that, for reasons as yet undreamt, her world had just changed for the better.

The Nadder stood there, quite still in a second of quiet and perfect exaltation. Then the dragon's claws bit into the half-frozen turf as she again stood tall. Unbidden, her wings opened up and out to mantle her new form as if in coronation.

Astrid lifted her bright-scaled head high to the morning air. The dragon drew a deep breath, flung back her head and opened her terrible jaws wide. With a thunderous roar of proclamation and rejoicing she sent a spear of magnesium flame high, high into the heavens to banish the mist and to greet her new day.

7. Chapter 7

****Chapter 7****

The two furies lay side by side, heads on paws, and gazed in bewilderment at the antics of the humans before them.

::Hmm. How curious. Your thinskin, Toothless... is he sickly?::

::What? Hiccup? No, I don't think so...::

Disconcerted, Toothless peered closer at his human.

::He looks all right to me. What do you see? Tell me!:::

::His face has turned bright red. Is that normal? I don't think I ever saw such a thing before.::

Toothless snorted with glee.

::No, no, it's quite normal! He does that quite often. All humans do, when they get embarrassed about something. I don't think they can help it.::

::Embarrassed? I don't understand. What's the problem? I thought you said they like to be clean.::

::Oh, they do, they do. And to get clean, they need to shed those silly coverings. But in their clan, normally it's not allowed for a male and a female to do this together. Mostly, they go into seclusion to bathe.::

Melisma's eyes grew wide. She wriggled her hind quarters and flicked her tail in delight.

_::Oh, but this is delicious! Whoever would have thought it! Such

quaint customs! Did you ever wonder, Toothless, how ever they manage to survive as a species?::_

::Many times. But it beats me. If I ever work it out, I'll let you know.::

::Do, please. Glad I'm a dragon, me.::

And then, in an undertone, and seemingly to herself:

::They always do survive, though...::

The party had decamped to where a burn ran from the island's wooded heights towards the sea. In one stretch of its way this meagre watercourse flowed, by chance, through a cirque of man-high boulders. These the dragons had heated with their flame till the stones cracked in protest and the air shimmered all around. The saddlebags yielded up the washcloths and the spare smocks to Hiccup's hands while Viggen glared furiously at her own, as if anger and frustration alone could imbue them with dexterity. Despite her best efforts, the bar of lye soap kept slipping through her fingers and splashing to the water at her feet.

Hiccup knew there was no delaying the moment. Reaching to slacken his belt, he glanced accusingly across to the furies.

"Having a fine old time of it, aren't we? Can't you find anything better to-"

His rant was cut off as he found himself hoisted, unceremoniously, ten feet into the air. One of the Nadder's eyes, little more than a hand's span from his own face, swiveled to meet his gaze as he swung to and fro, dangling from his belt by a single fang. He imagined he must look like some child's toy, or perhaps a hapless seal pup teased by an orca before being devoured.

A faint aroma of seared fish filled the air.

"ASTRID! What the Hel..."

Despite his humiliation, Hiccup couldn't help but be amazed at how quickly Astrid had grown confident with her new body. If she'd misjudged the stunt only slightly, she'd have skewered him on the spot. But as shocked as he was by the suddenness of her move, he saw that the look in the Nadder's eye was not unkind and not uncaring.

::Now shut up, Hiccup, and listen really hard!::

Hiccup became very quiet.

::It has to be done. She has to be shown how, and only you can do it. Start with her hair. Demonstrate, if it helps. She'll learn.::

"I know, Astrid, I know. It's just... well, it's barely light, and I think I already passed my limit of weird for the week."

_::You have my sympathy. No, wait. More than that. You have my gratitude. Know something, Hiccup? You're all right. I think I can

trust you. From where I'm looking, it could be a lot worse. After all...:::_

Her pause hung heavy in the air while Hiccup hung, swaying gently, from her jaws.

::...at least you're not Snotlout.::

The young man pulled a thin smile; it seemed a backhanded compliment was the best he could hope for at this point. "Thanks. It's hard for you too, I suppose."

She stamped a foot, snapped out her wings and rattled the spines along her tail. _::I was never much for the prissy before all this, Hiccup. And by all the Æsir, I'm certainly not now! But I won't see Viggen hurt. If it helps you at all, you should know that I spoke with her about this. She really has no idea what all the fuss is about. She just wants to be clean.::_

"Somehow, hearing you say that just makes it even worse."

A harsh snort. _::What's this? The fabled slayer of the great Queen, defeated by a bar of soap? Come on, Hiccup. You'll cope. You'll live.::_ Her nostrils suddenly flared, then twitched. _::Dammit, Hiccup Haddock, but you reek. Just get washed already.::_ She started to lower the young man slowly back down, but just before his feet touched the ground, she stopped.

::Ah, Hiccup...?::

He looked back at her, alarmed to see that the wide black pupil had thinned to a hard, narrow slit. The great scaled head canted abruptly to one side; his belt slid on the fang and he lurched wildly once again. Suddenly his entire vision was filled with an ominous blur of green and blue.

_::I _**_can_**_ trust you, can't I?::_

Hiccup rolled his eyes, cursed quietly in disbelief at his lot that morning, and embarked upon the most awkward Laugardagur of his young life. But Viggen turned out to be a quick learner, and for this one small consolation Hiccup was eternally and infinitely grateful.

* * *

><p>It was a dismal, drizzle-sodden dawn, clammy and close, leached of all colour and brightness by the clouds that shrouded Berk's high cliffs. Stoick trudged the streets, lending a hand at every house with the impromptu repairs. He was utterly weary from the night's exertions but couldn't allow himself to rest, no, not yet. His desire to help was genuine, of course, but just as importantly the chief knew he needed to be seen this morning, calm and in control. The damage to houses and property was not so very great; certainly no worse than from a moderately bad raid in times passed. But the dragons' sudden alarm and departure had shaken the villagers, and in a village strangely quiet after months of hubbub the chief imagined he heard grumbles of fright and discontent around every corner.

So this was a morning, like so many before it, for the chief to steady the ship. This time was different, though. This time he also

had to contend with the shocking implications of Hiccup's words and actions, which continued to roll round and round inside the father's mind.

"Oh Hiccup, what have you dumped in my lap this time?"

A chief had to lead, and Stoick wasn't afraid to do it. He didn't shy away from the tough choices, for he was old enough to understand that a poor decision was often better than no decision at all, to know that few outcomes could be predicted with certainty. To make the most of the information to hand, however incomplete or unreliable: this was all, realistically, that he could hope for. And fairness? By now he'd seen enough disputes to know this was the slipperiest thing of all, there to strive for, seldom to achieve.

The hard experience of years had also shown him that simple bad luck could skew events against the best of intentions, and at times like those there was no profit in finger-pointing. Let others blame the gods or seek to cast the runes; though he still paid lip service for appearances' sake, in these changed days Stoick had no time for the old superstitions. After all, his son had made sacrifice to no gods to stay that knife; all he'd needed was a measure of heartfelt compassion and a healthy dollop of courage, and those were qualities that came from within Hiccup alone. It was, Stoick thought, a fine irony that whilst he himself had striven so long for victory by force of arms, it was through inaction, the stillness of a single small blade, that his world had been saved.

Stoick thought that if he managed to do half as well as his son, he'd be well content. And as if to make up for the years in which he always expected to find some fault with whatever Hiccup said or did, the father's first instinct now was to listen to his son, to trust him. He'd been surprised at the speed of the change within him, and still more at how quickly he'd grown comfortable with it. And with this new outlook Stoick was shocked to discover a depth of wisdom and a keenness of judgment in Hiccup that belied his tender years.

But there'd been something different about his son this time. He'd been unsettled, off balance, even as he spoke those words that seemed to set their world on an edge once again.

Dragons were people, he'd said. Toothless understands the words you speak. A madman's words, most would say, yet still they settled like stones, for their truth was confirmed by the evidence of the chief's own eyes.

Stoick burned with the need for a fuller explanation. Never had the chief felt so exposed, so deprived of critical knowledge. Lack of information and bad decision-making made for fine bedfellows. Yet here he was, left to deal with the aftermath of Astrid and Hiccup's sudden departure, as well as the exodus of all of the dragons, apparently on his son's command.

Stoick had to consider the possibility that Hiccup's knowledge of dragons was not, in fact, as complete as they'd supposed. That his decision and his actions represented the best course he could manage at the time. Perhaps even that there might be some information to be protected. But if that was so, the chief had no notion of what it might be. He had the sudden, panicked thought that Hiccup might have been acting under duress. But it seemed unlikely; Hiccup had no human

enemies that the chief knew of. Amongst the dragons, then? Again, Stoick couldn't picture it. With the benefit of hindsight, the chief now saw there'd been an implicit trust, perhaps... what should he call it? A kind of respect that could be read in the demeanour of every dragon around his son. And as for the Fury, well, it seemed to place more value on Hiccup's company than upon life itself.

So he wouldn't imagine the worst. He would try to remember his son's last words: that he would return, and all the dragons too. He was forced to admit, though, that the promise didn't make his immediate task this morning any easier. Not one bit.

He was drawing near to the Hofferson house, or what was left of it. The letter, unread, was burning a hole in his pocket; he would deliver it to Astrid's parents now. But how much, if anything, should he repeat of Hiccup's spoken message? He would have to play that one by ear.

The chief drew a deep breath, steeling himself. He couldn't put this off for any longer. But he froze for a moment, even as he reached to rap upon the door, for out of the crazy tangle of events that were inexplicable and explanations that were nothing of the sort, another possibility had just wound its way through to him.

Far more than just clever, Hiccup had shown a maturity of mind that went well beyond his age. The evidence for it was beyond doubt. Was this quality, like his courage and his humane temper, also borne innate within his son? Stoick knew it could not be so, for he'd learnt long ago that wisdom and good judgment don't come built in. You gain them from experiences; your own, and those of your mentors. And who had Hiccup been able to count amongst his? Certainly none of his own peers, and least of all (though it pained him sorely to admit it) Stoick himself.

There was only one other it could be, for all the chief's mind railed against the notion.

The scourge and saviour of the village. The dark-skinned, dark-scaled beast that was his son's companion through almost every waking and sleeping hour.

The Fury. It was the Night Fury that had been his son's teacher.

* * *

><p>The braids had been in a terrible mess. As he worked at them, knot upon knot, Hiccup wondered what part of Viggen's recent adventures had done the most damage. Was it the rough sleeping, the crashes at the cove, or an evening spent slipping around a blazing village on dragonback? Perhaps it was just all that flying with a Nadder still fresh to the airs.<p>

Hiccup sighed. It didn't matter. But he vowed this was the first and the last time he'd unpick these plaits.

At last he sorted the worst of the tangles, leaving the rest for Viggen to work at on her own. The comb he'd managed to grab during their hurried packing was double-edged, with teeth coarse and fine; Viggen was fascinated by it, and delighted to discover that the long whalebone handle fitted her hand perfectly. The joy on her face as

she pulled over and over at the long strands was so palpable that it quickly infected the whole group.

Flying aside, Hiccup was never happier than when he had his notebook out, sketching away. So now, as the washed smocks and undergarments lay steaming on the still-warm rocks, the young man sat down cross-legged and began work on a new drawing. He'd just penciled in the outline before his light suddenly dimmed; Astrid had moved her head across to inspect his progress. She snorted as she recognised the image of her old self taking shape upon the page.

::Huh. I should be flattered, I suppose.::

Unseen by the Nadder, Hiccup's face hardened slightly. He paused at his task and, not even looking up at her, reached inside his tunic. He drew out a small folding pocket-knife, opened it with a flick of the wrist.

"I really wish you'd told me, Astrid!"

He set to whittling the charcoal end of the pencil, quick, deft strokes of the knife - skrit, skrit! - and in a few short moments the chisel point was reformed.

"Why didn't you say the saddle was chafing so badly? Those bruises on Viggen's legs... flying's not meant to be painful, you know."

He held the pencil up, checked the tip. Satisfied, he clicked the knife shut, put it away, and turned to look up at her accusingly.

The Nadder hung her head. _::I know it. But I was really starting to get there with my riding, and we were learning so fast... didn't want to stop, not for anything, and neither did Viggen!::_

Some of the harshness fell then from Hiccup's face.

"I know the feeling; it is addictive. It's just that fixing the saddle out here's going to be hard... it'll just be something temporary. But as it happens, helping Viggen this morning, seeing those marks... well, it got me thinking. Look, let me show you and Viggen together."

He shuffled across so they could both see his sketch in progress. Viggen, staring wide-eyed at the image of her new body, was mesmerised. To her, Hiccup's magicking of images onto the page was no less miraculous than Melisma's emergence from Shadowing.

"From what Toothless tells me, flying's not really an optional activity for dragons. Right, Viggen?"

As he spoke his hand still danced over the page, and instantly the outline of a leg came alive as it acquired bone structure and muscle tone.

"Err, Viggen?"

Astrid gave her mate a gentle nudge and Viggen blinked, returning from a world of wonder entirely contained within the picture taking shape before her.

"Is right. Every day, even in snow, in hail... all fÃ³lk must take the air, shape the air, with these..."

She reached out and ran a palm along the leading edge of her mate's wing. Astrid, surprised by the movement and not expecting the pleasurable sparks it set off, let out an involuntary croon of approval. Toothless moved up to them, continuing the story:

::As my dam would tell it to us as hatchlings: the minds of the fÃ³lk are strange things, strong but unstable. Long ago, a great spirit of the sky saw the truth of this. But the forms of the fÃ³lk in flight so pleased her that she made a bargain with our kind. A space she keeps for each of us aloft, asks only that we rise up to fill it each day. In return, she blesses the airs around us, and so keeps us sane::

"Hear that, Astrid? Better take care of those wings!"

The Nadder's eyes widened in alarm, but Hiccup just chuckled.

"Don't worry. Turns out humans can protect dragons from that. You'll be just fine on the ground, so long as you've got Viggen. And you'll always have Viggen, I think, just like Toothless will always have me."

"Yes, yes! Is so!"

::But... what? Hiccup, that makes absolutely no sense. How on earth does that work?::

He grinned back at her, shrugging his shoulders. Astrid seemed disconcerted; she obviously wasn't ready for this new version of Hiccup, honest about his own ignorance and comfortable with it, at least for the time being.

"I have absolutely no idea. Came as quite the shock, I can tell you, to Toothless and me both. But in any case, I think you two'll be flying a lot together, from now on. So I was thinking... what about this?"

Quick hands darted over the page once more, and the image started to transform. Hiccup rambled on as he drew.

"Needs to be waterproof, windproof... flexible too... we'll line it inside, sheepswool, lambskin... what d'you think, Viggen? You like?"

It was no Viking that looked back defiantly from the page. The face was Viggen's own, but gone were the braids; the hair, shorter now, was held back in a simple bob. But it was the figure's clothing that really caught the eye. In the drawing Viggen's body was leather-clad from neck to ankle, with trousers in a close but comfortable cut. Above them, a similarly tailored jacket, buttoned tight from chin to waist.

Viggen was ecstatic.

"Yes! Yes! When?"

He closed the notebook with a snap. "Soon as we can. Soon as we're back in Berk, and all's set right."

::And when's that going to be, huh, Hiccup?::

He glanced up at his friend, she who was now so comfortable with these wings, these scales, this tail.

"Honestly, Astrid? I don't know. But there's someone here who might."

His caught Melisma's great yellow eyes, unfazed now by that intense, otherworldly stare. Whoever or whatever she really was, he still had no idea. But if she meant them harm, she'd had ample opportunity to inflict it before now.

"_Well_, dragoness?"

* * *

><p>All of the lamps were lit, the seal-oil flames guttering high, as if in some feeble attempt to banish the ill fortune that had come to visit the Hofferson house that day. AdǼlfr strode the flags, the rhythm of his strides punctuated by the bang, bang of hammers on nails as his neighbours worked to replace their shingles. His wife AlfdǼs, face haggard with worry, sat in a straw-backed chair by the fire, vacantly twirling a spindle whorl over and over between fingers that knew no rest.<p>

The letter hadn't helped matters very much. AdǼlfr brandished it now as he paced about.

"Is this _it_, Stoick? Just these few words?"

He tossed the scrap of paper down upon the bench and went over to his wife. Standing behind, AdǼlfr reached around to lay gnarled hands on her shoulders, rubbing gently there. Stoick remembered why he did this: it was good for the tension she felt in those muscles, he said. Right now the chief suspected AdǼlfr desperately needed to do something - _anything_ - to feel useful again.

The despair and helplessness that rolled out from them left Stoick struggling for words.

"I... I wish I knew what to say to you. But I'm just as puzzled by what they did, and by that... note. But whatever's going on, I think she was trying to reassure you. It says she's well, asks for you not to worry. That they will return."

When they didn't reply, he carried on, needing to fill the silence but painfully aware there was so little he could say or do to help them.

"I saw them with their dragons, remember. Before they left. I think they were looking for me. I think they _wanted_ someone to see them, someone who could vouch that they were all right." A moment's hesitation. "I think their dragons will protect them. Now more than ever, I believe that."

And more than that he would not say. Not today. Right now, Stoick

judged, it was better to tell a partial truth - albeit one he felt rather certain of - rather than broach the wider issue. Adǫlfr and Alfdǫs were in no state to hear it.

"So what now, Stoick? What do we do now?"

"We patch ourselves up, Adǫlfr." Stoick squared his shoulders. "We help each other out and we patch up, just like before. We carry on."

Alfdǫs glanced up at her husband.

"They're together, aren't they, Ǫlfr-mǫn?" Her voice was so brittle and harsh. "That's why they left. To be together, just them and those beasts, no _family_ to get in the way..."

She was bitter and unthinking, and Stoick couldn't blame her one bit. But he wished that he hadn't spoken up so strongly for the dragons, just moments before. Fortunately, the quiet rumble of her husband's voice saved the chief from having to speak against her words.

"I don't know, my love. I'm not sure that's it." His hands never ceased from kneading her shoulders. "We would have approved of the match, and they must've known it. So why would they leave? And _all_ of the dragons flying off, too? No, there's something else, some other reason..."

There was a sudden commotion at the back door, and an instant later Finna came crashing through, tear-stained and disheveled. With never a glance at Stoick, she flew straight to her mother's arms.

"Is it true, mama? Is Astrid gone?"

Stoick caught Adǫlfr's eyes for a moment. There was nothing more he could do here, not now. The chief nodded quietly at the man, and withdrew.

* * *

><p>"Vigilant Council."<p>

::Yes, Hiccup::

"In Orknoyar."

Melisma looked back at him, deadpan.

::That is your name for those islands, yes::

"We're flying to Orknoyar, tomorrow."

::The Council meets twice a year, when the days are most stretched and most shrunken. We are fortunate that it is Orknoyar this time; it is only a half-day's flight from here. But if we delay any longer, we shall miss them::

"We're flying to Orknoyar tomorrow to meet a bunch of senior dragons so that -"

_::So that I might plead your case. You may earnestly hope that I

succeed, and that the Council decides not to take sanction against us.::_

He peered at her more closely, but there was nothing in her demeanour to suggest that she was other than completely serious.

"And meeting with this Council is an attractive option for us because...?"

:Because if we do not go they will most assuredly search us out, and kill us all. Perhaps all of the Berk dragons, too.::

The young man could only stare back at her. He could find no ready words with which to reply. As he slumped back against Toothless' side, a dark, lopsided tail looped protectively around him.

:Cheer up, Hiccup; our chances are fair. The Council is already appraised as regards Toothless and yourself. When you killed the Queen you achieved something they greatly desired, but could never achieve. Your names are weighty, now.::

Hiccup's eyes widened; _that_ piece of information was going to take a little getting used to. With some effort, he forced himself to concentrate on more immediate concerns.

"So... why ever would they harm us?"

:Because their respect for you is matched by their fear. A fear that will be magnified ten times over, once they learn of what Astrid and Viggen have done. There will be no hiding it from them, not for very long, whether or not we stay or go.::

"I still don't see -"

:It is a long story. I will relate what I can of it, before we meet with the others. Although...::

She frowned, sensors falling back flat, as if frustrated by some inner failing.

:...not all of the tale is known.::

* * *

><p>They took a risk when they built so close to the cliff-face. But winter had been coming, and the village desperately needed to rebuild its storage after a particularly bad raid. And that meant they needed to find some flat ground, a place where the building would be quick.<p>

Unfortunately, flat ground in Berk was a rare commodity. In fact, the only bits that weren't already built on were right on the edge of the cliffs.

There was a reason those sites had been left. Just five years after construction, a foul storm on the equinox and a spring tide combined to ravage Berk's coast. There'd been several big rockfalls that night as the sea reclaimed the land for its own. And when morning came, the villagers found only half a barn where they'd had a whole one just the day before.

The ruin was off-limits to Berk's children. But when you're thirteen, rules like that really only exist to be broken.

Finna loved that barn. She loved that it was forbidden, a secret, dangerous place, a retreat that was hers and hers alone. She loved to lounge on the hay-ricks that had survived at the landward end and gaze through the ragged hole that gaped in grisly yawn upon the treacherous sea. In Spring she watched, fascinated, the mating of the rock-doves and the wrens that came amid the roof-timbers and the turfs thrown all awry, the dying barn their domicile for new life. In Autumn her refuge became a windbreak as she spied the goose-skeins heading South, the wind's moan and the clamorous calls of the birds sounding as one in her ears.

It was her beloved second home, and she thought she knew it inside out. And although in this she was mistaken, it would be easy to forgive her this error, thirteen years and all.

She failed to consider how that barn might look from beyond the cliffs; how temptingly cave-like to those of a certain disposition and having certain needs; how enticing the updrafts that rose from the ocean's face to the very threshold of her domain.

She realised her mistake soon after the last of the needles fell from the larches and the last of the geese passed overhead. Not long, in fact, after the dragons came to live in Berk and the world was made anew. One day she went again to her favourite place, only to find it claimed by another.

Looking back later on that first meeting, Finna supposed it was only by some miracle of self-control that the Nightmare didn't immediately flame up. It was just as well the dragoness didn't, as it would have destroyed the nest she'd crafted so lovingly in the straw. But the greater miracle was that Finna stood her ground, trying desperately to remember Hiccup's words about these dragons. She recalled that they didn't come. Perhaps she simply sensed that the beautiful creature would not harm her, trusting in the otherworldly intuition that her parents had seen in her and had led them to name her and to own her as theirs.

It became a forbidden friendship in a forbidden place. Finna, the younger daughter, had been told she was still too young to fly. Her parent's edict went hard with her. But instead, she would be witness to something no Berker had ever seen: a new dragon generation, starting right there in her village.

And so she strayed again to the barn on the day of her sister's desertion, the company of that Nightmare the fittest she could imagine at that moment. Somehow she was confident the dragoness hadn't left with all the rest.

She'd expected eggs. Incubation. She'd puzzled over how long the process might take.

What she didn't expect was to come once more to that precious stronghold to find three Nightmare hatchlings, blind and helpless, stumbling about under their mother's protective gaze.

Nightmares bore live young.

* * *

><p>The short winter's day was already fading out, the grey in the sky thickening once more in the east. At least it looked to stay dry. While Viggen scoured the scrub for firewood, Hiccup and the furies made trip after trip to the bay at the south end of the island, where the water was shallow enough for plunge-diving after mackerel.<p>

In short order, a sizable number of fish accumulated by the fire. As Toothless vomited the last of his catch, Melisma spoke.

::We must all eat well tonight. I do not know when we shall next get the chance.::

Hiccup was unimpressed. Regurgitated fish was, for him, a meal for special occasions, not a staple. He was already missing the variety in his diet.

Toothless, picking up on his companion's mood, pointed out the obvious.

::Oh come on Hiccup, they're really fresh! You love mackerel! What are you going to do, eat limpets from now on?::

Melisma's sensors perked up.

::Quiet for a moment, you lot!::

A curious roe deer, a young male with horns still in velvet, had stuck its head out from the bushes.

::Be still!::

They froze. But Melisma calmly got up on all fours and ambled off towards the deer, no hurry at all, and no attempt at concealment. They even heard her grumbling, under her breath.

::The things I do. Nursemaid to thinskins...::

The deer stayed still, quite unperturbed. Melisma stopped a short distance from it, cocked her head slightly, and closed her eyes. The buck fell straight to the ground. Then the black dragon simply walked up and closed her jaws around the slender neck. There was a sickening crunch.

The female Fury calmly walked back to the others, teeth still closed on the deer's throat. Its head and body lolled to and fro in horrible synchrony.

She deposited the deer neatly at Hiccup's feet.

::Enough for... what do you say Hiccup, nÃ;ttmÃ;l, is it? I'm still not sure how much you humans like to eat. Have you quite finished growing, do you think?::

"Erm..."

Toothless saved him from his embarrassment.

::Enough? Enough, you say? If he eats all that we'll never fly again!::

Hiccup was already reaching for his knife to butcher the deer.

"It's fine, Melisma. Really it is. Thank you."

::You are most welcome. Eat, Hiccup. We will follow you, not to waste it.::

And so they gorged on venison and mackerel that evening. Ate until they could eat no more. At last, Hiccup refuelled the fire and sought the welcome warmth of his partner's wing. He started to doze off almost straight away.

But just before he fell asleep he voiced the worries that wouldn't quite leave him, no matter how secure he now felt, enclosed in those leathery folds.

"Melisma..."

::Mmm?::

"You never told me the story..."

::I will, Hiccup, I will.::

"And... I was wondering. If dragons can do what you did to that buck..."

But there was only silence then from the female Fury.

8. Chapter 8

****Chapter 8****

Shock, disorientation, adjustment; it was becoming her regular waking pattern these days, her new normality. And as resigned as she'd become to the unexpected, it would be nice, she thought, just once in a while, to begin a new day from some known starting point.

Clearly, that wasn't going to happen today.

::All right, so this is different...::

The scrubby islet, their temporary refuge from Berk, was no more. Instead, Astrid found herself standing on an unknown sandy shore that stretched unbroken to the horizon. Tiny ripples lapped gently at her claws, the only movement on an unnaturally calm and placid sea. The beach rose gently inland in a broad yellow swathe, but beyond the strand the landscape lay hidden behind a featureless grey mist. Overhead, insipid, greenish light shone forth from a sunless sky. It unsettled her that, even with her enhanced hearing, she could detect not the faintest stirring of wind, not a single cry from a distant gull. This new world was entirely silent.

In the space of a heartbeat she took it all in, and then paid no more heed, for her attention was drawn by a more immediate concern. Right in front of her, snout to snout, stood another Nadder. And so matched

was her body with that of the other dragon, so alike were they in every aspect of their conformation and colouring that Astrid thought some magic must be at work, and she was somehow staring back at her own reflection.

She had a notion to test the idea. Yet when she turned her head aside, watching to see if the other followed suit, her edge-vision told her that the second dragon was not quite her mirror-image after all. Seen from the corner of her eye Astrid picked up a faint turquoise aura that seemed to shimmer and pulse, ghost-like, all around the other's form. The blue-green veil disappeared as soon as Astrid turned her gaze straight ahead, but she'd had enough time to recognise the hue. It was exactly the same shade that she'd seen yesterday on waking, albeit present now as a gentle wash rather than violent jabs of colour.

::V... Viggen?::

Her mate seemed completely unfazed by their surroundings. Viggen chirped, reached over and, using her front horn, playfully stroked Astrid's jaw just under the hinge. Astrid struggled to remain standing, so overwhelming were the pleasures invoked by that simple touch.

::Greetings, oh sleepy one! I think you could doze through anything, a storm even.::

Slowly, as if to savour every second, Viggen spread her wings. As she did, she gazed with rapture on every shifting membrane, every rib and scale, for all the world like some starstruck lover reunited with her darling after lonely weeks of separation.

::Oh, yes!::

Viggen started to beat hard, rising quickly up off the sand. As she hovered there, paired spirals of misty blue light spun away from her wingtips to dance in giddy circles all around the two of them. From her lofty vantage the dragon crowed out to Astrid, clear and exultant:

_::Better. Much better. Been wanting to do this for
_**_days!_**_::_

She thudded back to the sand and folded her wings. Twisting her head over her shoulder she started to preen the scales along her flank, crooning an idle melody all the while. Astrid could only stare at her wide-eyed, understanding no part of what her senses were telling her; not this strange new setting, not Viggen's reversion to dragon form, and certainly not the sudden new eloquence of her mate.

Viggen, picking up on the silence, raised her head with a questioning glance. And with that, Astrid found her voice at last.

_::Viggen... where are we? What _**_is_**_ this place?::_

Seemingly perplexed by the question, Viggen glanced around, derisory, at their surroundings.

_::What do you mean, where are we? Looks like a Fury's mindscape environment to me, standard layout. Where else could we

be?::_

::**_What?_**_::_

_::Oh. _**_Ohhh._**_ Yes, I see. Your first time in one of these, isn't it?::_

::My friend, a short explanation right about now would be really helpful. Y'know, before I lose my mind, and all.::

::Ha! Lose your mind! That's a good one!::

Viggen danced a joyful pirouette, her claws scratching out intricate criss-cross patterns in the sand.

_::It's just a little playground for our fun and learning, made up inside the head of that new darkling. Furies are good at this stuff. A little _**_too_**_ good, if you ask me... they're always showing off. The brats!::_

::Then... these aren't really our bodies? We're just dreaming this?::

::Well, that's one way of looking at it. Yes, you can think of it as a dream, if you want. A rather special dream though, one you'll remember later on, after we return.::

Astrid tried to process this and, failing miserably, tried a different tack.

::Errrr, so Viggen... why are you a Nadder again now?::

::Hmm? Well, this is my true form, obviously. We always appear in the mindscape as our true selves. Nowhere to hide in a dream, right?:: She made a quick dip of her wings, dragon equivalent of a shrug. _::Unless there's another Fury in the mix, up to some shenanigans. Then, as the thinskins say, all bets are off.::_

::But... but...::

Viggen was way ahead of her.

::And yes, my bright-scaled friend, that is your true form, too. You chose, if I'm not mistaken, just yesterday morning? Congratulations, my love. You're a Nadder now. Which is fine, really it is. I'm very happy for you!::

And indeed, Viggen did seem irrepressibly chipper. She continued in the same cheery, tossaway tone:

::It does, however, present us with one tiny practical difficulty, you and I.::

Astrid was reeling, but had just enough wits left to reach the inevitable conclusion.

::In the real world, just the one dragon body.:: _

Astrid thought back to that moment of heady abandon when she'd

exercised her choice with never a thought as to consultation or consequence. The enormity of her decision hit hard now; all she could do was to stare back at her mate as the dismay and remorse welled up, threatening to overwhelm her. _::Oh Viggen, I'm so sorry. What have I done? And what ever can we do now?::_

::What now, you say? Hmm, let's see...::

Viggen dropped her wings at the shoulders, squinted in the semblance of a frown and, cocking her head, stuck her tongue out slightly. It was, Astrid realised, a perfect mimic of Hiccup's 'I'm concentrating, don't disturb me!' look.

::Ah, I've got it! What do you say we think about dealing with this Vigilant Council business, and try to avoid getting killed tomorrow?::

Astrid couldn't believe that she heard those words. They were spoken without hint of sarcasm, merely cheerful practicality. She'd seen before how selfless Viggen could be, how ready to place Astrid's welfare before her own. But this apparent forgiveness of her own selfish act, this willingness to move on... she couldn't imagine any Viking acting this way. It filled her with a sense of wondrous gratitude for her friend, as well as a powerful notion that she'd just acquired a self-imposed debt that was going to be very hard to repay.

But Astrid realised her companion was right. If Melisma's assessment of the danger facing them was correct, then she shouldn't let herself be distracted by other concerns. And certainly not, she thought grimly, by such trifles as her unthinking decision to keep her mate's body in preference to her own. So, she forcibly pushed the issue aside in her mind, unresolved. She knew full well that the guilt would only fester, yet still she managed it. And after that, still one question remained.

::But Viggen, I'm still wondering... why this place? Why now?::

::Now that, my love, is a better question. Why now, indeed?::

Viggen considered it quietly for a moment before brightening once again.

::Yes, of course. That 'story' Hiccup was pestering her about... he's going to hear it the proper way, the dragon way. See, here they come now!::

And sure enough, when Astrid turned, there along the shore came two familiar figures. It was certainly Toothless and the young man, but there was something off about them. It took Astrid a moment to realise she'd never seen the Fury with a whole tail. And so used had she become to Hiccup's prosthetic that to see him walking on two regular feet once more was jarring.

To Astrid's immense relief, Hiccup appeared to be every bit as perplexed as she was.

"Ah. Two Nadders. Of course; what else should I have expected?"

He glanced, frustrated, from Astrid to Viggen and back again.

"Help me out here, guys. I can't tell you apart."

Astrid shook her head in disbelief, snorted, and moved up to him.

::It's me, Hiccup. Toothless fill you in?::

"Well, yeah." Hiccup rolled his eyes. "If you can call it that."

::It just doesn't stop, does it?::

But before he could reply Toothless cut in, urgent and excited.

::Be quiet and listen, all of you!:: _He turned sad, wide eyes on his companion and Astrid._ ::I'm sorry you two, this won't make any sense, but there's no time to explain.::_ _And then:_ ::Viggen, hear me now. There's something you should know, something about Melisma, about her clan.::_

Viggen was all ears. _::Go on.::_

::She might be Counternamed, Viggen. Counternamed! Do you realise what that could mean?::

The Nadder shook her head, disbelieving.

::But those dragons are no more! If they ever lived at all! Just silly stories for the hatchlings!::

_::Just like Shadowing was a myth to us, you mean? What if they weren't just stories, Viggen? What if the Counternamed _**_do_**_ still live?::_

The Nadder didn't reply. Just stood there, jaws agape, tail twitching.

::Just be ready, Viggen, that's all I'm saying. I don't think this is any regular story.::

And just at that moment, a little to one side, a section of the grey mists parted like curtains drawn back upon a brave new day. Within the opening, against a backdrop of green, stood a human figure. She was, perhaps, in her mid twenties. Her frame was large but shapely, her garb that of a Berk maiden in Springtime. She wore a broad, honest smile, and her hands stretched out towards them in open invitation.

Astrid glanced nervously at Hiccup. Who could be capable of this new trickery? More important, of all the images to throw before the young man, who would have so cruel a heart as to choose this?

Hiccup seemed unable to move. But Toothless shifted close to his companion, nudging gently. And at that lightest of touches, Hiccup's demeanour hardened. His arm went across the Fury's neck, and suddenly there were two pairs of green eyes glaring back at the newcomer with

unwavering, steely unity.

It occurred to Astrid that she wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that paired gaze. Certainly not to explore what the two of them might be capable of together, if push really came to shove. Only a fool would want to deal with the Fury's ire along with Hiccup's determination when the two of them stood shoulder to shoulder like this, resolute, completely inseparable.

Toothless spoke, measured and low, in a tone that carried the promise of boundless menace and warning.

::We know you are not real, apparition. Do not think to threaten or deceive us! But speak, and quickly, whoever or whatever you are!::

The newcomer seemed genuinely shocked. The smile fell from her face and her arms to her sides, shoulders sagging.

"Forgive me; a misjudgement?"

That resonant alto, though so familiar to Hiccup, had never in his memory sounded so reticent, so contrite. Or was the distance of years already clouding his remembrance?

"There are many things for you to witness in this place, Hiccup. But your time is very short, so I am provided as a guide, an interpreter, if you will. And it was thought this form would be a... a pleasing semblance, as it features so much in your fondest memories." She paused for a moment, glancing nervously at Toothless. "It was either this, or a proxy of that black beast at your side. But there are already quite enough dragons on this stage."

She paused as if distracted, glancing aside for a moment. Then she shut her eyes with a frown and a sigh that seemed to carry the burden of a deep dismay.

"Now I understand. A poor decision indeed, made in haste. This form is a hindrance, not a help."

She bowed her head.

"Apologies, Hiccup. No affront or injury was intended."

Long moments passed as the young man continued to gaze upon her. Eventually he turned to the friend at his side, his face grim and wracked. His voice, when it came at last, was so stretched and brittle that Astrid thought it might break at any moment. But somehow the words were still clear.

"It's fine, bud. She's not my mother. I have a feeling Melisma's only doing her best."

He turned back, steadier now, to the Norse woman.

"We do need a guide; thank you. But what shall we call you, here, in this place?"

She glanced up at him hesitantly, sadness and hope strangely mixed in her eyes.

"I had no existence before you came here, Hiccup. And none shall I have after you leave. But you may call me Leivari."

* * *

><p>::You're a Nadder now.::

Astrid was changing.

Deep down she'd already known the truth of it, had felt it in her heart even before Viggen spoke the words that filled her with exhilaration and terror. But still her mate's confirmation shocked her, for she knew that Viggen hadn't been talking about her physical appearance. Astrid sensed it too keenly for denial: the stark revision to her outward form only masked a deeper internal reworking, one that would fit her perfectly, once complete, to her proper place and station in life as a Nadder of the North Atlantic.

She had to be honest with herself now. She had to acknowledge that, unseen, unknown, her attitudes, perspectives and priorities would shift towards a dragon's mindset and outlook. She yearned for a fuller understanding of the process, but she didn't - she couldn't - grasp the nature of the transformations working away quietly within her, couldn't know how far they might go. And when the changes had had their way with her, what - if anything - would remain of the blond-haired young woman who'd sat so naïve and wistful on Berk's rocky shore, just a few short days ago?

She didn't know. But, she reminded herself, she'd never been one to spend time agonising over puzzles that seemed to have no solution. Perhaps this was part of what had drawn Viggen and her together in the first place; certainly her companion seemed to share something of the same trait. And in any case, just getting used to her new senses was quite enough, for now, for her to deal with.

Astrid revelled in her heightened sensitivity. The constant reek of ozone and seaweed unconsciously filtered out, the better to pick up the whisper-faint scents of other dragons, the sharp-edged threat-smell and the tang of potential prey. Her sight that of a creature whose rightful abode was up aloft, attuned to the sea's wide vistas, keyed to pick up the subtlest change in distant cloud or wave. Her hearing, so accustomed now to the wind's roar and to the wave's crash yet still sensitive to the strong, dear heartbeat of her mate.

So when, with the others, she took that single step to pass through the mist's gate there was no warning, no time for preparation. Just one step to enter a world more alien than she could ever have imagined. The wall of heat and humidity slammed into her hard, and she reeled and staggered.

Astrid never thought she'd come to count her new senses as a disadvantage. But their keenness was no use at all in this frightening new place of heavy, claustrophobic scents, her vision hemmed in by a miasma of green, her hearing assaulted by the deafening churr and whine of countless insects in that dense, dripping forest.

Unwittingly Astrid gasped, gulping in great lungfulls of air as she

recoiled from the onslaught. Only to find that every breath seemed to fill her with a strange new energy that threatened to make everything much, much worse. Panicked, she stared around her, only to see that all of her companions seemed to be suffering, Toothless worst of all. Leivari glanced across at them, a look of wry amusement on her face.

"You may care to take shorter breaths for a while, and fewer of them. You especially, Fury, you whose lungs have known the Thinning. There is more sustenance to the airs here than in any place you have dwelt before."

Gingerly sipping at the air, Astrid fought back the nausea flooding in from her protesting eyes, nose and ears. They were in a forest, that much was clear, but ah! what a forest, how magically transformed! Standing there in the sweltering heat she brushed her head on ferns and horsetails grown Nadder-tall in a dense understory. The plants thrust vigorously up from a loam whose hot, dark scent was redolent of teeming life. Soaring above them the trees were just as strange, the staunch, buttressed trunks scaled like some unknown dragon's pelt, the branches throwing off manic whorls of spiky, glossed leaves in bizarre, complex configurations.

A tinny squawk pulled Astrid's attention back down. There, through the ferns, came scuttling a creature every bit as alien as its surroundings. Not much bigger than a Terror, the little dun-scaled reptile scuttled fast, its upright stance confident on hind legs set bird-like under its body. The forelimbs seemed to be half-claw and half-wing, little use in Astrid's eyes either for foraging or for flight. Constantly bobbing and twisting its elongate neck as if checking for unseen threats, the creature quickly quartered the forest floor. From time to time it would pause, cock its head on one side, and root vigorously through the leaf litter before emerging with a beetle or grub. Behind, three miniature versions of the same creature skittered close, never more than a handspan away from the adult.

The little party veered closer to Astrid's claws, and she took an involuntary step back. Leivari chuckled.

"Have no fear, Astrid; she cannot see us, cannot hear us. How could she? She has been dead these long, long ages passed. Yet she is where our journey begins."

Hiccup wiped the sweat from his brow. "She's what you brought us here to see?" He peered closer at the little lizard and her family. "She's not much to look at."

"Oh, really? Wait and see, Hiccup. She'll fool you."

The young man's eyes narrowed. "The past, you say. Just how long ago was this scene, Leivari? Can you say?"

"Oh, very good, Hiccup. Very quick." She looked at him askance, sharp blue eyes appraising. "But if I did tell you, you would scarcely believe me."

The young man folded his arms across his chest, glaring back at her, quite resolute.

"Try me."

"As you wish." An impish smile crossed the face of their guide. "Tell me, Hiccup... how long might a Norseman live?"

The young man hesitated at the unexpected question; it was a delicate subject between Toothless and himself, and not one they'd properly discussed as yet. But it seemed he'd walked straight into a trap entirely of his own making. And so eventually he mumbled out his reply, unsettled:

"I dunno. Forty years. Fifty perhaps, the lucky ones..."

"Ah, just so. And yet, with dragons at your side, we might allow your luck to run a little, hmm, Hiccup? Let's say fifty years."

"Well, all right..."

She stretched out an arm towards him. Touching a forefinger to her shoulder, she started slowly to walk two fingers stepwise down her forearm, past her elbow, past her wrist. At her palm the fingers reversed their travel, heading back up.

"Imagine now twenty such lifetimes, laid end to end. Do you have a word, Hiccup, for this span?"

"Well, sure, a thousand, but... where are you going with this, anyway?"

She leaned across to him, suddenly wide-eyed and animated. Abruptly, all he could smell was his mother's scent and all he could feel was the tingle of her braids against his ear. As he stood there, disoriented, she whispered intensely to him:

"And a thousand, a thousand years, Hiccup? Do the proud Norsemen have a name for this span?"

A low growl started to build in Toothless' throat. ::You waste our time with this nonsense, Leivari. Of course there is no such name. None could imagine such a span.::_

She flicked angry eyes up at him, instantly reproving the challenge.

"Oh, but you are mistaken, my fine damaged one! There are dragons who imagine it, yes, easily, and much more besides!"

Calming then, she gestured again to the lizard mother, who'd just pulled a big centipede out of a rotting log. Immediately the hatchlings started squabbling over the wriggling morsel.

"She is the one universal, the single point of origin. All of the Counternamed have borne witness to this scene, and nothing predates it. The calculations have been examined and checked, yes, both by us and by all of our forebears. There can be no doubting the matter: our little friend here last trod the earth some seventy thousand thousand years ago. But see, here! The cusp of the memory approaches!"

A sudden ruckus broke out amid the ferns, and crashing through came a new creature that to Astrid's febrile gaze seemed to consist only of

pure-distilled ferocity and malice. Long-limbed, sickle-clawed, the powerful trunk densely feathered in red and blue, the newcomer loped with agile gait into the clearing. Its piercing binocular stare roved about from a crested head as high as Hiccup's shoulder, the long jaws snapping over and over as if in perpetual hunger. An instant later the newcomer saw the little lizard family, dipped its head, and shrieked. Astrid knew they were as good as dead.

A flurry of dead leaves erupted in the clearing as the three young lizards darted off between the trees. Their mother stood her ground, letting out a piercing scream of defiance. It was futile; the raptor lunged the distance in two quick strides, opening its terrible jaws wide...

...and ran, full tilt, into one of the trunks at the mother's side.

Astrid blinked, and looked again. There stood the lizard mother, frozen to the spot, staring wide-eyed at her would-be killer now writhing miserably in the dirt, the body twitching this way and that in its concussion. After a moment, the mother turned and ran off through the foliage, calling to her young all the while.

Leivari watched them go with something like reverence in her eyes, before turning back to Hiccup and the rest.

"Fyrsta af Mǫrgum, we call her, the First of the Many. Her bones were dust long before the lands of Berk were raised from the seas. And long, long before there were Nadders and Gronkles, Furies and Nightmares and men. But she is not forgotten."

* * *

><p>They gathered again on the mindscape's soundless shore, glad enough to leave the clammy oppression of the forest and to breathe freely once again. And as it turned out, they needed all their wits about them to deal with what Leivari had to say next. Her words took on an eerie focus as they fell upon the silence, demanding the complete attention of the listeners. It was a talk the likes of which no human had ever heard before.<p>

But first, at their guide's prompting, Hiccup ran through what he'd seen.

"That little lizard - Fyrsta, you said - she distracted the bigger one. It must have been her scream. She screamed so loud that he missed his aim, ran into the tree instead..."

He trailed off, seeing Leivari slowly shaking her head.

::She tried to tell us before,:: Astrid said quietly, remembering. _::Our first night on the islet, around the fire. Something Melisma said then, about dragons... it's not the wings and the claws and the fire, she said.::_

"Think, Hiccup. Open your eyes, and you'll see what truly makes a dragon."

Hiccup thought back to recent events, desperately searching for some pattern.

Astrid's firstflight; her disappearance masked in a blinding shock. Melisma's entrance, as if from empty air made flesh. The Berk dragons, less able than they should be. The felling of that deer...

And there it was.

"She threw a Shadow-image at him!"

"The very first. Actually, it wasn't really a proper Shadow-image at all, and she didn't know what it was that she did. That doesn't matter. You were partly right before, Hiccup: she did distract him, just for a moment. But it was a nudge from her mind that did it, not the scream."

Leivari seated herself upon the sand, gestured for them to settle too. Clearly, the story was not yet fully told.

"Who can say how it arose in her? Some rare chance in her breeding perhaps, the elements that went into her makeup altered, reshuffled in some new way? We may never know. But she touched the mind of that raptor with her own, and she was the one who survived. Her young inherited the trait, and they survived too. A useful thing, you see, for creatures like them, a brand new way to help them live another day.

"Years came and went; hundreds of years, thousands. And in the generations that followed her, some individuals showed the new ability more strongly than others. More with the stronger trait survived, and so on it went. Pretty soon those little lizards weren't just avoiding the raptors; they became the hunters themselves, invading the minds of their prey, at first to confuse, later on to stun.

"But their skills were still so limited. However effective, theirs was a rough and ready talent, a blunt instrument. And in their solitary lives they were still vulnerable to a hidden predator, still restricted in the prey they could take. Above all they remained animals, eating, surviving, mating, driven by base instinct alone. They were not yet dragons.

"It seems so obvious, now, with hindsight. But thousands more years had to pass before one of them crossed the line, made the fateful move that enabled everything that followed..."

She paused for a moment, glanced around at them, seeming to invite their questions. But none of them dared to speak. Indeed they hardly dared to breathe, sensing that some crucial revelation was at hand. And after a moment, Leivari continued with the tale.

"...before one of them risked everything to open her mind to another of her kin, trading an image of ::lizards hunting together, surviving together::. You know of what I speak, Astrid! It was the same pure, unfettered trust that you offered Viggen, back on Berk that night of JÃ³l. And the results... well, the results were just as profound.

"Quickly their co-operation grew, and as it did, so too did the strength of their purpose. The images they shared became more subtle

and varied, their hold on those they would flee from or eat more certain, more complete. Before long nothing could touch them, and hunger became but a distant memory. Invulnerable to attack, their physical needs ever-satisfied; however would they spend their days now?

"At first it was simple games that they played, back there in the dawn of their self-awareness. Today the ravens tumble and roll in their flight, and otters slide upon the grassy banks. But back then, the lizards became dragons as they tossed images back and forth, modifying, embellishing, challenging one another in their sport. In such innocent pastimes was their sentience born, their language forged."

Again Leivari paused, and in their stunned silence she again looked around at her audience. Her eyes fell on Hiccup at last.

"Well, my intrepid young thinskin? No questions, no queries at all? Indeed you disappoint me, human!"

And for the second time that day the young man's arm snaked across the neck of his friend, the Fury's certain strength the only succour he could trust to at that moment. Even so, Hiccup's question, when it came, did so as but a whisper.

"How, Leivari... or Melisma, should I say? You must tell us... how do you know these things?"

She turned a kindlier eye to him then, and Hiccup sensed there would be no lie in her response. As Toothless had explained it to him, the mindscape was a place only for the truth to be seen, heard, understood.

"Your species trusts its history to books, Hiccup, does it not?" Leivari accented the word minutely, somehow conveying an infinite distaste. "In books, or to the memories of your old ones? But always the victor who writes the story, never the vanquished. However can you hope to learn from the past with such a fickle memoir?"

"Dragons have no need of books, Hiccup. For every few years a dragon is hatched with a rare and curious gift, though at times to the bearer it can feel like their very bane. Because the Counternamed, you see, are the guardians of our past. All of the dragons' glories, all the mistakes, our triumphs and our shame; all of them we remember piecemeal, here and there, as we sleep. And then... well, then we come to a place like this. We draw the memories together, find their proper place in the line of time, weave a denser strand. And then we share with others what we have dreamed, much as I have with you today. In this way is our story told, our past remembered."

"More I would show you, my curious young thinskin. But I warn you, Hiccup..."

Leivari looked aside, her eyes troubled with guilt.

"There is precious little to like about dragons in this tale."

* * *

><p>AN: I will admit that this chapter was a

challenge, and even now I worry that it might feel contrived. I would welcome feedback on what worked (if anything!) and what didn't.

I also apologise that it reads like a bit of a lesson in evolution in places. This was hard to avoid; I prefer the 'evolved on earth' option for the origins of the dragons, rather than anything supernatural, extraterrestrial or engineered by technology. In my head-canon dragons are just another of earth's creatures. And having made my dragons telepathic from the outset, I just decided to go the whole hog and make it their defining ability, and the one responsible for their success.

The forest scene is meant to be from the late Cretaceous, with tree-ferns and monkey-puzzle trees. The raptor that fails to catch the lizard is *Deinonychus*, and in writing the description of this dinosaur I benefitted from the wonderful reconstructions by Rhynn on DeviantArt. Go check out his dinosaur and dragon artwork, it's really beautiful and very, very skilfully done. The little lizard isn't based on any single fossil, and although I made her up there are a number of small theropod dinosaurs from the Jurassic and Cretaceous that share some of her physical attributes.

The Cretaceous was a hothouse world and its atmosphere had a greater oxygen content than the one in Viking times (or in today's, for that matter). So I figured that visitors to that time would experience a drug-like 'buzz' from breathing in the hot, rich air. For an explanation of why Toothless is so badly affected, you'll have to read the start of Chapter 4 of 'Learning Curve', which deals with the notion of Thinning :)

Leivari is from the Faroe word 'Leiðari', meaning guide or leader. According to my Faroe dictionary, anyway!

And lastly, I am so excited that Fjord Mustang made a wonderful, intriguing picture of Melisma for me! Take a look over at [fjordmustang . deviantart . com # / d5qpjfk](http://fjordmustang.deviantart.com/#/d5qpjfk) (delete all those spaces). She's done a great job on my favourite OC. Read her stories - she's her on FF under the same name.

9. Chapter 9

****Chapter 9****

The rain had fallen hard on the parched uplands for three solid days. The patchy soils and grasslands of the montane slopes could only hold a little of what fell; the rest came together in teeming rivulets which in turn fed the foaming streams, racing away with urgent purpose towards the valley floor. There, in the river's rocky bed, they merged in terrible fury.

Part-hidden by its own drenching shroud of spray, the spate seethed down the bursting channel. It snatched at the banks on either side, tearing loose stones, boulders and trees without discrimination; the rocks tumbled wildly in the surge, while lighter debris floated in an errant mass to the torrent's centre, tossed round and around in the tumult as it roiled downstream. On the farther shore, beyond the flood, sheets of rain lashed down upon the ochre land from low-slung storm-clouds that were not yet fully spent.

Close by the deluge, clothing sodden, Hiccup stood flanked by the two Nadders. The young man had seldom seen the bright dragons this close in the wet before, and he marvelled at how they seemed to shimmer before him, dazzling even under the heavy light. Impervious and immobile they stood as the water streamed from scale and spine, like matching totems of draconic gods suddenly animated by agency of the spray alone.

How blinding might they be, likewise wettened, if caught by Spring's joyful sunshine?

Shivering there, Hiccup found himself half-wishing he had those scales and that hide, too. The water finally seeped through to his toes, and at that moment the young man's patience gave out at last. It seemed that Leivari had brought him here just to get him soaked and to tempt him with a Nadder's pelt. Turning to their guide, he had to shout to make himself heard above the din of churning waters and destruction.

"Not seeing many new dragons here, Leivari. Are you sure this is the right place?"

In an instant she snapped to him with a withering glare.

"Question me now, would you, human? Think this easy for me, do you?" There was real venom in her voice, but in her eyes he read pain as well as fury. "I bring you here, ready to show you our greatest shame, and you make light of it?"

Hiccup knew when to hold his tongue. After a moment, Leivari continued:

"No dragon before firstflight may see what happens here, Hiccup. And perhaps you are still a hatchling after all, not yet ready to see what must be seen? Perhaps the Council should just have at you tomorrow, and be done with it!"

"No! No..."

For a moment she did not reply, and the roar of the flood swelled to fill his ears like certain doom. Finally Leivari's expression relented a little.

"Well, perhaps not. But do not jest, Hiccup, not here, not now. And do not question me again in this place! Only... watch."

They'd passed through the grey mist once more, emerging to the safe vantage of a rocky bluff to watch upon the raging flood. And as she spoke those last words, Leivari stretched out her arm towards the curtain of rain, one finger pointing as if in terrible accusation.

Something was emerging from the downpour, over there, beyond the river's far bank. Something enormous on four stocky legs, the dark-scaled trunk deep and broad, the massive head armoured with a wide bony crest and triple prongs. Big as a house, churning up a trail of mud as it lumbered forth, the behemoth seemed to Hiccup the very embodiment of brutal, unstoppable power.

The giant wasn't alone. No sooner had it cleared the rain-front than

another of its kind began to appear, advancing steadily after its fellow with the same determined gait. And behind these came four more, smaller individuals now, matching the course and speed of the two that came before.

A family group, Hiccup thought.

More and more appeared now from the rain, a dozen, a score, beast upon beast advancing on a ragged front. Each took several seconds to emerge, such was their size. But all moved as if entranced, oblivious to the sea of mud, the lashing rain, and the peril that lay before them if they continued on their present course.

They were heading straight for the river channel and for the boiling waters barely contained within.

They must have some reason, Hiccup thought. Some good grounds for a behaviour that seems, just now, to be completely inexplicable. But I've been watching dragons for a while now. I've got my eye in. Just give me a moment, and I'll figure it out.

All sense of reason, each and every possible explanation, demanded that the beasts stop, slow or turn. Demanded that they not continue as still they did now. That they not enter the surging spate.

The foremost giant advanced upon the crumbling bank and, without hesitation, stepped into the deluge. Its front legs instantly whipped from under it, the great body slumped forward, a breakwater of flesh against the flood. A sudden flash of spray flew up, the blunt mass resisting; but quickly the waters had their way with the new obstruction and the giant was swept into the current, now visible, now not, mere flotsam in that terrible flow. An anguished howl, half scream, half roar came to Hiccup's ears, as if the beast had suddenly returned to its senses to make a final, desperate cry of supplication or warning.

But Hiccup knew that any hopes of salvation were surely passed. And as for alarm, that last awful cry went unheard and unheeded by the victim's kin, none of whom paused for a moment in their progress. A section of bank collapsed altogether as the rest of the family tumbled in as one, a momentary thrashing tangle of stubby legs and tails; an instant later the single cry from the flood became a hideous chorus, the voices silenced one by one as the singers were swept under, down, past and away.

And still more of the giants issued forth from the rain.

Hiccup's mouth was suddenly as parched as the rest of him was soaked. He felt the pressing need for action, to do something - anything - to halt the terror unfolding on the far bank. But he was helpless, trapped there on the other side of the river; and in any case he knew without needing to be told that this was another episode from the past, already finished and done, incapable of modification. So he exercised his only other option, unable to hold back his words despite Leivari's instruction. He turned again to their guide.

"Why, Leivari? Why are they doing this?"

"You're not seeing the full picture, Hiccup. You need to look as a dragon would!"

Perplexed and sceptical, Hiccup squinted back at her sidelong. Leivari sighed, shaking her head in frustration.

"Look to the _skies_, Hiccup! Look to the skies, and see!"

He turned and looked up, relieved to turn his eyes from the carnage for a moment. Instead he glanced to the stormclouds that still glowered low over the land beyond the spate. And there, just glimpsed, were three winged forms circling near the cloudbase, right over the column of reptiles that solemnly trudged their final steps upon the earth below.

"Dragons... but I've never seen their kind before..."

"Oh, I should say not!" Leivari snorted briefly in disgust. "Those short, stubby wings, those grey-scaled, dumpy bodies? The lack of any embellishment or ornament whatsoever? No, Hiccup, no dragons of _our_ time would look this way. But in _this_ place, at _this_ time... well, they were the finest of their kind."

She watched them turn their lazy circles, grey bodies slipping in and out of sight against grey clouds.

"What are they doing, would you say, Hiccup? Hardly a coincidence for them to be up there just now, don't you think?"

The words fell upon him, their dreadful meaning sinking in, and Hiccup stared back at her aghast.

"No! Oh, no!"

Leivari met his eyes, giving a single, stern nod in confirmation. "Oh yes, Hiccup. It happened. We did this."

She looked again to the trio of circling murderers.

"Vigilants, doing exactly what they were tasked to do. And probably, very pleased with the efficiency of their operation. Days ago they started to gather these three-horned ones from their herds on the fern-prairies to the south. The dragons knew the rains would come, knew this stretch of the river would become as you see it now, perfect for their purpose. They had only to corral the large ones here until the time was right, and then guide them on their way."

The procession of doomed reptiles continued, seemingly endless, splash and scream, splash and scream. Eventually Hiccup could bear no more, and he shut his eyes.

"Enough, Leivari. I... I think I've seen enough-"

She turned to him then, and there was a cold, hard frost in her voice.

"Are you certain, Hiccup? The spate has a day left to run, and look, already hundreds more arrive for their turn in the flood. Would you sully their memory by denying them witness? Look upon them, Hiccup!"

But the young man kept his eyes tightly closed. Suddenly turning away, he bent double and retched violently upon the dull brown earth. Leivari spoke on, relentless:

"Perhaps you'd prefer something different, my tender young thinskin? Reptiles by the drove, sinking slowly into pits of tar? Falling headlong from the highest crags? Made to trample their own nests, eat their own unhatched young? You need only ask, and all these scenes can be yours as well! A panoply of death awaits, Hiccup!

Falling to his hands and knees Hiccup gagged till all his supper was spent, and then he gagged some more. When he could raise his head at last the nightmare was gone, and they were back on the mindscape's silent shore. Toothless, standing close, dipped his head and crooned soft and low; it was the sound of comfort that spoke more clearly to the young man than any words ever could. Eventually he found his voice once more, though his throat was sore and his mouth still full of the sharp, foul taint of bile.

"Why, Leivari? Why did the dragons do it?"

She drew a deep breath, sighed out heavily again. "Because they were afraid. And because they were jealous, jealous of the ability they alone possessed." Neither before nor ever after did Hiccup hear a speech so laden with remorse and shame. "And above all, because they craved command over their own fate."

"I still don't understand. You said the dragons had passed beyond any threat! It makes no sense!"

"And I told you true, Hiccup. The giants were no threat, none at all. And the dragons were determined it would stay that way."

She spoke on then in misery and despair, as if eager now to confess in full the sins of her forebears:

"Cousins of a kind they were, you see, all reptiles under the scales. And the same tiny spark that first lit in the mind of Fyrsta, back there in that forest of long ago, would sometimes flare again in one of the dragons' relatives. Not very often; but often enough. Of course the dragons noticed, and they were afraid. The others were so many, you see, so varied, so widespread; they were everywhere, in the seas, on the land, in the skies. And a lot of them were so very, very _large_.

"Fyrsta and her kind had been prey once, and the dragons vowed never to return to those days. And so the Vigilant clan was born; such a great honour it was, back then, to be selected. Hah!" She huffed once, a grim, disgusted laugh. "Between them the Vigilants quartered the world, and they were methodical, ruthless and thorough. It was a cause of many lifetimes, but in the end, the dragons got what they wanted. Only a few of their cousins were permitted to survive, those particular few fortunate enough never to show any signs of the trait.

"Yes, the dragons got what they desired. They had it all now, their futures theirs alone to determine, and for a time they revelled in their complete dominion. It was only in the years thereafter that they came to understand the folly of their actions, and to regret the isolation that was of their own making. But by then, of course, it

was already far, far too late.

"In their arrogance the dragons had thought themselves separate and superior, but in both they were mistaken. The malaise started simply enough, a lingering sadness that neither song nor soaring flight could quell, and soon enough it festered and spread. For as the years slid by the Counternamed began to dream of the high thermals filled with sail-heads, of seas where the swan-necked ones sang through the cool, dark depths, of ringtail herds grazing quiet and easy in the humid swamps; and on the mornings after those dreams, more than one mournful eye would be turned to the skies where now only dragons rode, to the oceans silent of those deep, dark voices, to the empty wetlands where now the pine and magnolia grew free.

"And so it was that they came to see their grand hubris for what it truly was, and the monstrous calamity it had bred; because those of my clan ensured none could ever forget. Regret quickly turned into a terrible guilt, and cool reflection down all the years that followed never lessened it, merely distilled it to a painful essence. To be a dragon today is to carry this burden from first flight to last, and this we have done for sixty-five thousand, thousand years. We no longer dream of redemption, for the guilt has become part of who we are."

She paused then, laid gentle hands on each of his shoulders, eyes pleading.

"May your kind never do anything to warrant such guilt, Hiccup. For it will consume you, as it did the dragons, back then long ago."

She set her hands on her hips, turning to stare out at the endless sea; and in the silence that folded around them once more Hiccup was left to dwell on the notion of a stigma inherited over ages far greater than he could ever imagine. But he also sensed there was more yet to be told, and whatever horrors the tale still had in store he was determined to hear it, whether their guide was willing or no.

"Leivari..."

She did not seem to hear him.

"You've brought us this far, Melisma. Now finish the story. These things are important, aren't they? You wouldn't have shared them otherwise. What happened next?"

But even on utterance of her true name she did not respond, and Hiccup realised he would have to take the initiative. He had a hunch about their guide, one he was willing to put to the test.

"Your clan name," he began, quietly. "The Counternamed, you said. That's a part of all this, isn't it?"

She turned her head minutely towards him, and he forged ahead, encouraged:

"You dream the past, you said, so that all might remember. But that means you see clearest of all what the dragons did back then. The memories haunt your clan worst of all, don't they? And... and I think you carry most of the guilt too, for all of the others."

A small shudder briefly shook her body.

"But it's more than just guilt, isn't it, Melisma? So many ages, keeping this knowledge fresh and close... why did the dragons do _that_, Melisma? Did you really loathe yourselves so much? Or... or were you worried... frightened there was a chance you might be capable of the same again, some day?

She turned slowly with a tense, reluctant smile, a single tear tracing down her cheek; but she seemed unwilling to catch his eye, instead glancing to the Fury standing close by Hiccup's side.

"The thinskins, Toothless... are all of them this perceptive?"

::Sadly, no.::

"Go on then, Hiccup." Her voice flat now, emotionless. "You're nearly there."

The young man's voice fell to an awed whisper.

"And so... when your ancestors came to name your clan, they chose something born of their disgust, something that would always remind them of the arrogance of the past, back when they thought they were perfect, superior..."

When she said nothing to correct him, he knew he had it right.

"They chose one conceit to tell of another!"

And with that she did look at him direct, eyes piercing despite their wetness, her expression that of the reluctant tutor suddenly relieved to see her pupil progress at last.

"We all have our strengths and weaknesses, Hiccup, and those of the Counternamed are no exception. One of my own weaknesses is music. Or rather, the lack of it. Without bragging, I may say that others envy my speed of flight, my endurance in the thinnest airs, the purity and focus of my fire. But to sing the simplest tune? No, it seemed this was never to be; and so, when my dreams began to manifest and the Counternamed took me for one of their own, there was my name, right away."

She spoke on fervently then, all reticence gone, as if Hiccup's chance insight had broken the spell that had kept her silent before.

"But other seeds were sown with that great extermination, Hiccup, ones the dragons never anticipated, yet still they rooted and spread. I have another scene for you now, Hiccup. You're going to need Toothless' help."

Hiccup turned to his friend, hopping on easily; and as he clipped in Toothless spread his wings, slow and wary.

::Leivari...?::

"The thin airs, my fine Damaged One. Just for a few

moments."

_::Leivari - _**_NO!_**_:_:

But already the mist was swirling about them once again, and Toothless screeched out, incandescent with rage:

::Of all the cursed reptiles - !::

"What the -?"

The great muscles beneath Hiccup's thighs came alive with a sudden, quick tension he'd never felt before. Glancing to left and right he saw his companion's wings stretched out in tight razor arcs of unknown configuration.

_::Deep breath Hiccup, a really deep breath. _**_Right now!_**_:_:

Hiccup thought it best to comply. And an instant later
-

"Aaaaargh!!!!"

_::You can say that again. Of all the crazy stunts! I'm gonna
_**_kill_**_ that dragon!:_:

Hiccup was used to flying now, but the thrill of it still quickened him every time. The exhilaration, the danger, and the intimacy of his bond with Toothless took him to places of ecstasy he could never fully describe to any other. There were, quite simply, no words for it in human speech.

But _this_ flying was different. This flying, he _would_ find words, later on, to capture.

'Terrifying' might sum it up nicely, he thought.

An instant deep, deep darkness, and he but a waif cut through by winds keener than any he'd ever known. A sense of utter isolation, the only certainty the touch of Toothless in his thoughts and the thrum of his dragon's torso beneath him. Cold, so cold; looking up, his stinging eyes adjusted to reveal a glittering smear of pinprick jewels that spangled across the whole of his vision. Yet when Hiccup stared out to where he knew the dragon's wings must be, there was nothing to be discerned but two great curves of shadow. Toothless' wings remained invisible, their presence only betrayed by occlusion of the river of stars far, far beyond.

The wind sang in the dragon's fins as he banked to left and right, trying to settle in that great gale of air. A sudden gust struck them, and the wind's cry rose to a howling wail before the dragon adjusted to the new flow.

Hiccup was quite convinced, this time, that Melisma was out to kill him after all.

"Ffff - fffreeezing!"

_::It's the height, Hiccup. The height, and the _EilÃ-ft Vindur_.

Hold close to me; I'll warm you up a bit.::_

"Hold - you - _what?_"

_:Just _**_do_**_ it! And it'll help if you stop talking out loud!:_

Hiccup flung himself forward, his body tight against Toothless' neck, arms clasping close on either side. And suddenly there was a wonderful warmth at each point of contact, radiating out from the dark scales, flowing into his ungloved hands and through the thin tunic that was the only covering to his upper body.

_:Toothless? What... what are you _**_doing?_**_::_

A familiar chuckle rippled through his mind as the great dark head turned back to him. The dragon's wide eyes sparkled in the starlight, and Hiccup knew that, hidden though it was by the darkness, his companion's face would be wearing that same infuriating grin that by now he knew and loved so well.

:Redirect some blood, dilate the capillaries. Welcome, Hiccup, to the Furies' true realm. Welcome to the thin airs.::

Hiccup made a mental note to quiz his companion long and hard at a later date. Meantime, satisfied that he wasn't going to freeze to death at any moment, he dared to glance about him.

:Oh... oh, my...::

Directly below them there were no stars, just an inky chasm of darkness that denied any inspection by his eyes. But up ahead, a change was in progress. It drew and held his gaze, completely mesmerising.

Rimming the black was a whisper-faint line of darkest indigo, tightly defined below, diffuse above, extending out infinitely to Hiccup's left and right. As they rode on upon the ceaseless wind the line of light slowly brightened, strengthening, morphing to blue and spreading ever upwards. Building strongly now, the light spilled ever quicker into the heavens until at last the first direct rays of blazing yellow stabbed through the darkness to light the new day.

:Dawn!:

:Gotta hand it to her, I suppose...: Toothless snorted, feigning indifference. _::Melisma may be insane, but she's got style. What a combination.::_

With a sense of relief that was as overwhelming as it was irrational, Hiccup at last picked up the familiar outline of his dragon's head, neck and wings, gold-edged, as if magicked into being by the sunlight. And at that sight, suddenly all was right again with the world. The young man sagged forward once more, closing his eyes and laying a cheek to the smooth, dark scales, eager for more of that blissful warmth that welled up from the amazing creature beneath him. A comfortable drowsiness started to overtake him; the harshness of the wind was less severe if he lay _just so_, and he found himself slipping off easily into a wonderful dream, one in which he was the

one with the wings and the fins and the tail, soaring forever in elation high, high above a land of perpetual sunrise.

::Hey Hiccup, wake up! You want to see this!::

He pushed up reluctantly from his comfortable slouch, forcing his eyes to focus once more. It had been so much nicer to just lie flat, to float gently away...

::Don't you see them?::

What? Oh, them. Yes, of course he saw them - _yawn!_ - but they didn't seem important right now. After all, they were only dragons, and somewhat familiar ones at that. Just a bunch of greyish, vaguely Fury-shaped dragons, wings held out just as stiff and hard as Toothless' own, banking and turning, rising and falling, all racing along together in that sharp, savage wind.

It was, he supposed, a little odd that their bellies bulged like that, each and every one. What would you call that look? Dis - distinctive, yes, that was the word. Very distinctive. It reminded him of something. It was almost as if, almost as if they were - they were...

The mist of the mindscape engulfed them once more, but Hiccup never saw it. He'd collapsed, unconscious, sprawled across the neck of his friend.

* * *

><p>::Got a moment there, Leivari?::

"Hmmm?"

Toothless' forepaw swipe lifted her effortlessly from the sand, and an instant later the heavy woman was swinging helplessly in mid air, her throat neatly caught between two of the black dragon's claws.

::What happens to us, Leivari, if I just kill you in this mindscape, right here, right now?::

"D - don't know..." She squeaked out through a windpipe that was very close to being crushed altogether. "Bad things, probably..."

The claws tightened.

"Gggahhh! -"

_::Damn you, Leivari, he almost _**_died! _**_And not a single thing I could do about it!::_

Toothless flexed his grip, just very slightly, and she started to breathe a little easier.

_::One day soon, Leivari - or Melisma, whatever - you and I are going to have a very private and personal little chat about manners. Specifically, _**_your_**_ manners around _**_my_**_ human.::_

She hacked out a squawking cough, her face contorted with the pain of

it. "Won't that be fun?"

With a dismissive snarl he flung her away, turning instead to the frantic young man at his side, who was still trying with insistent but ineffectual hands to calm the Fury down.

"Hey bud, hey, hey, simmer down! I'm all right!"

The black snout thrust up close, the nostrils flaring wide as the dragon drew deep of Hiccup's scent.

::You sure?::

"Right as rain. Never better. See?" He flung his arms wide. "In fact, I want to go again!"

::Phah!:: A derisive snort was the Fury's only response to that suggestion. The dragon nosed him in the chest, hard enough to wind him a bit; and with that the great green eyes swivelled up to meet the young man's own. _::What ever am I going to do with you? You're just as mad as she is.::_

And with those words the Fury released him, turning to curl up on the sand. The tailfins swept over to cover the dragon's face, and with that Hiccup knew that an epic Night Fury sulk was just getting underway.

He went to where their guide still crouched on all fours - wary, perhaps, of another attack - and sat down cross-legged at her side.

"Don't get me wrong, Leivari. I appreciate you showing me the thin airs, really I do. But it might be worth giving us a bit more notice next time, if you can." He glanced across ruefully at his friend and companion. "He's kind of protective, you see -"

A muffled snarl from beneath the mass of black fins and wings confirmed that the Fury wasn't so preoccupied as not to listen in.

"Protective, you say?" she croaked, reaching up to her throat where a raw reddish welt held the promise of an spectacular bruise. "That great lump would kill for you, Hiccup, would die for you -"

"And I for him. In a heartbeat. That's the way it is now."

The tailfins flicked once, twice, then stilled once more. And after a moment, Leivari spoke again, as if to herself, her voice barely above a whisper:

"So strange..."

"Leivari?"

"How far a dragon would go for a thinskin, Hiccup. Before today, if anyone had told me, I would not have believed it. I see it now, though."

They sat together in silence for a while, and Hiccup allowed his attention to be drawn to Astrid and Viggen where they stood a little

ways off, nose to tail, contentedly preening one another's flanks. Clever girls, the young man thought; far enough away to remove themselves from any confrontation, close enough to overhear whatever might transpire.

Right, he thought. Easy question first.

"So, Melisma... I take it humans aren't really cut out for the thin airs?"

She glanced across to him, shrugging.

"Neither humans, Hiccup, nor any dragons, other than the Furies. Toothless was right when he told you it was our realm; none of the others can live for long in so little air."

He thought back to that awful, magical time aloft. To see the stars so clearly, to look down upon the sorry earth from such dizzy, exalted heights, to ride that endless wind for ever and ever, circling the world. If through some miracle he was somehow fitted for a life up there, would he ever want to come down?

"It's important to you, isn't it?" he whispered. "Spending time up there is a part of you, part of what makes a Fury a Fury?"

She glanced across at him quickly then, sharp eyes sparkling once more.

"Damned perceptive thinskin. But yes, Hiccup, the thin airs are special to us indeed."

He heaved out a heavy sigh, and Melisma's eyebrows raised, quizzical.

"I just realised something, that's all. He'll never go there again, will he? In real life, I mean, not in a mindscape. We were so high, Leivari... I'd pass out on the climb, long before we ever came close. He's never mentioned it, but the thin airs are just one more thing I took from him."

She laid a calming hand on his shoulder. "You can always go there together, for a short while, through a place like this. All you'll need is another Fury to help you out, and to return you safely when the time comes. I'd recommend warmer clothing next time, though."

"I know, I know. But it won't ever be the same. Not for him."

It continued to prey upon him, and as other, more worrying questions forced their way through, Hiccup started to wish he'd not started on this line of enquiry at all.

How much more had his companion been keeping from him? And how would he ever know for sure?

The great body still lay there immobile, tar-black against the sands. But even as Hiccup's thoughts began to darken Toothless' voice cut in calm and clear, and the young man knew the dragon's words were meant for him and him alone.

 ::I hold no secrets from you, Hiccup. And know this: thin airs or

no, I became more dragon than ever I was before, when first I bonded with you.::_

The words wrenched him hard, and it took him several deep breaths to regain his composure. Melisma stared, perplexed at his distraction; and Hiccup quickly decided it was time now for the harder questions after all. He took a deep breath.

"The thin airs, then, Leivari. I take it I wasn't up there just to enjoy the sunrise?"

"No, Hiccup, you were not. Tell me... what else did you see, after the sun came up?"

"Didn't have long. But - but there were other dragons there... lots of dragons. I think they might have been Furies -"

"Ancestors of the Furies, and some of the first to fly so high. Notice anything particular about them, did you? Anything unusual?"

"Well... oh gods, this is going to sound so weird! But they looked... they looked pregnant, all of them!"

"You are almost right. But those dragons laid eggs, Hiccup. You saw female dragons, each heavy with clutch, flying on the Eil ft Vindur. Week after week they would ride that high wind, exposing their eggs to the harshest rays of the dark beyond, until their laying-time drew near."

It was a notion so bizarre that Hiccup could only stare back at her dumfounded. Astrid and Viggen ceased any pretence of grooming and drew close, spines up and aquiver with curiosity; and even Toothless emerged from his self-imposed retreat, reluctant now to miss out on any of the proceedings. And as they approached, Hiccup found his voice at last.

"But that's... that's just crazy! Wouldn't that damage the eggs? Harm the young dragons, before they hatched?"

"Yes indeed. And that was precisely the intention."

This time there was no response at all from the young man.

"You said it yourself, Hiccup, just a little while ago. The dragons did hate who they were, inheriting, as they had, the terrible deeds of their forebears. And in time their guilt and disgust drove a sort of insanity, a twisted reasoning telling them that if only they could change their outward form, they might also lessen the hold of the demons within.

"It was a nonsense, of course. But it proved to be a welcome distraction, better than dwelling year after year on a past that could not be put right. Ages came and went, and gradually their new distraction became something more: it became an obsession. And in meeting their desires, the dragons were not content to let nature take its course.

"Runts of the clutch, anomalies of hatching... they had always happened from time to time, of course, rare though they were. But the

dragons found they could increase their rate, increase it massively, by exposing their eggs to certain... well, to certain hardships. They tried everything: from the hottest springs to the coldest wastes; from those hard, harsh rays of the thin airs, to the dark brown ore of greasy lustre that burns forever from within. The results were spectacular and appalling.

"Most eggs failed to hatch at all, of course. And in the hatchlings that did emerge... oh, what hideous transformations, what dreadful deformities! Few of those poor creatures ever lived to see a second sunrise.

"And yet... and yet, just sometimes an egg would split and out stumble a dragon that did not die, a dragon with some new aspect both beauteous and wonderful. And at those rare, rare times the air would ring with the roars of celebration, for the parents of the hatchling and all the clan would think themselves blessed indeed.

"Do you doubt me, Hiccup? It is all true, I do assure you! You need only look at the dragons of Berk. The ancestors of the Nadders, for example, came to glory in vain adornment; why else those long, long fangs, that bright colouration? For the Furies it was all about flight; their speed, their endurance and control. And the Nightmares... well, they loved fire like no-one else.

"There was one clan, though, that had no time for such indulgences. Because for the descendants of the Vigilants, life had a quite different purpose. Whereas once they flew to search out and kill, now they voyaged on a different mission, looking everywhere for any of their cousins that might have been missed, any with that spark of the mind that they had striven for so long to snuff out. And they swore most fervently that any that they found would be lavished and nurtured, and brought to fulfil all of their potential.

"For long, long ages they quested, searching amongst the reptiles, and their relatives, the birds. It seemed futile, yet still they persevered, for yes, they were the most willing of penitents! And eventually, their search was rewarded. Not quite as any of them had expected, though..."

Hiccup stared at her, his mind racing. The wonder of it, to think that dragons had kindred amongst another kind!

But Leivari looked at him very calm and straight then, and her words were sure and certain, careful not to leave any doubt.

"They found this creature on the plains of a hot, dry land, so, so far from here. They found that spark in the mind of a mere mammal, one who had learnt, not so long before, to walk upon two legs."

* * *

><p>AN: Well, why do you think the dinosaurs went extinct? Please don't talk to me about asteroids - it was obviously genocide.

The doomed giants at the start are Triceratops. Everybody loves those guys.

sailheads = azhdarchid pterosaurs

swan-necks = plesiosaurs

ringtails = Brachylophosaurus canadensis

Strictly speaking, pterosaurs and plesiosaurs were not dinosaurs, but I figured the dragons wouldn't get hung up on little niceties like that.

Melisma's musical disability may or may not have been inspired by the character of Mumble in Happy Feet. I love that film.

Eil ft Vindur = Eternal Wind, the dragon's term for the polar jetstream. This places their altitude during that episode at 7km - 12km. At this height, a human would suffer extreme hypoxia and be concious for no longer than a couple of minutes, so you can understand Toothless' concern. The dawn happens so quickly because the jetstream flows West to East in the Northern hemisphere.

"the harshest rays of the dark beyond" = cosmic rays

"the dark brown ore of greasy lustre that burns forever from within"
= pitchblende, a radioactive ore of uranium

The term 'clan' has a somewhat flexible meaning to dragons. It can mean a same-species grouping with strong familial ties, or a group of unrelated individuals identified by some ability or activity - like guilds in human societies. Membership of multiple clans is possible. Thus Melisma belongs to the Counternamed on account of her dreams, but she's also a Vigilant - of which more, soon!

10. Chapter 10

****AN:**** It has been a good while since I updated this story, but I am committed to finishing it. A sincere 'thank-you' to all my readers for your patience. At the end of this chapter I've included a synopsis of chapters 1-9, together with some short notes on themes and vocabulary.

****A Dragon's Gift**
>Chapter 10

* * *

><p>Orkney - 'orcs' - the school of sleeping whales,
To those who glimpsed it first,
>Hills half-sunk in the sea.<p>

- George MacKay Brown

* * *

><p>So, what do you say to a dragoness of barely two day's acquaintance, to a Fury quite at home in Berk's northern skies and who had, it seemed, been watching over a village of vikings and dragons for the-gods-alone-know how long, unseen behind her mind-spun cloak?

To a dragoness who conjured fantastical alien worlds to tell the long

sad story of her kind; who, if that tale could be believed, carried the terrible, ancient guilt of an entire species upon her broad black wings?

A Fury who'd have you understand that dragon-kind and human once stepped out as scale and skin together, in a time long, long ago when the first was already old beyond imagining and the other barely minted new?

Such was the conundrum facing Hiccup now.

Melisma hadn't broken eye contact for so much as an instant. And for now it was no draconic gaze that met his own, nor that of just any human, but the loving eyes of his own dear mother, pleading, ever-caring, reaching out in supplication from the still-clear memories of his childhood.

The soundless shore of the mindscape seemed to shimmer and fade, the horizon blurring as sea and sky merged to one. Hiccup's perception swam, and for a moment the only things that seemed certain in his world were the steady strength of Toothless at his back and the human form of Melisma gazing back at him. Her eyes verified, without any need for words, that which Toothless had already told to him that day: that the mindscape was a place only for the truth to be heard, and no place for falsehoods at all.

Words failed the young man still. But staring back upon his long-dead mother's form, Hiccup's thoughts drifted, by and by, towards her living mate.

Hiccup knew that at this moment, somewhere far from here, his father must be grappling with puzzles of his own. Not least of which a vanished, strange and wayward son who'd told him - such a little time ago! - such _other_ things that simply could not be believed: that dragons were a people, that they thought, and felt, and spoke...

Did his own face bear the self-same mask of incredulity that Stoick's wore back then, when their own beloved village smoked and smouldered all around them?

Hiccup didn't have it in him to hold Melisma's gaze for any longer, but neither did he wish to turn away. And so he shut his eyes and bowed his head in simple acknowledgement and trust. It was the best - indeed the only - response that he could muster.

But as things turned out, it was the best response of all. Melisma's gratitude broke over him like some great ocean wave that, having travelled all the waters of the world, was relieved to spend itself at last, exhausted but fulfilled, upon some distant shore.

::Thank you, Hiccup...::

The voice of the dragon became the voice of the sea, the roar and tumble of waves on shore, the comforting, familiar hiss of backwash over timeworn rock. The sound beckoned to him, and his bewildered, unresisting mind was glad enough to follow.

Hiccup opened his eyes and saw the stars. A whisper-faint lightness in the east presaged the coming dawn. His ears filled with the surf-sound, overlain with a Nadder's gentle rumble and Viggen's muted

human words.

The young man drew deep of the gathering breeze, the ozone-sharpness of the sea softened by his Fury's own dear scent; the young man's backside cramped against the turf, but Toothless' flank was warm and soft against his shoulder.

Hiccup reached down to his left leg and, sighing briefly, felt the wood and metal present and correct once more.

They were returned from the mindscape at last.

* * *

><p>It came easier to Finna, the second time around. No less wonderful, of course; but now the wonder wasn't sullied by her stomach leaping up into her throat, by the quick and certain knowledge she was dead for sure.<p>

It was true: she'd gotten comfortable in the red-scale's company. Found herself distracted from her daily chores with idle thoughts of more time at the barn. But that was before she'd barged in all unknowing on four live Nightmares, not just one. She'd cursed her own stupidity and ignorance, for it was fanciful to think that one could disturb a dragoness with her young and live to tell the tale.

And yet her friend had not attacked, and here came Finna, still alive today.

She'd brought along some fish this time. Mackerel, raw and oily, chopped up small; some decent lumps of cod as well. She'd worried she'd be spotted, sneaking house to house with the heavy creel upon her back, but hardly a soul was up so early on this morning. The villagers were still in shock after the dragons' sudden exodus, and exhausted by the rushed repairs of the day before.

A fresh sea breeze had gotten up to sing and sigh around the wrecked barn's roof and crumbling stones. It occurred to Finna that the wind might mask her footfalls, and she didn't want to ride her luck by surprising the dragoness two days in a row. So it was with an idly whistled tune that she swung her lightweight frame, awkward with the creel, around the jagged threshold of the ruin's seaward edge.

The odour of the fish, not just her tune, forewarned of her arrival. Four pairs of red-gold shining eyes swivelled up to meet her gaze.

Finna smiled, heaved the creel from off her shoulders...

...and cursed herself once more, as she realised just where she was and what she'd done.

The villagers had been offering food to the dragons for weeks now. But always in the open, the fish lobbed whole to grateful mouths or just laid out upon the clifftop turf. Either way, it came instinctively to keep one's distance as the dragons fell upon their meals. For while those awful jaws had never once been turned upon a human since the great Queen's defeat, there was nothing quite like the sight of feeding dragons to bring back bloody memories of when indeed they had.

Finna could command no such respectful distance, not here, not now, for the adult dragoness filled the barn to almost overflowing. The Nightmare mother whuffed at her, close enough to ruffle Finna's hair. Saliva began to dribble down a fang. To the girl it felt like some long-lost cousin had come to dinner and had, against all decorum, neglected to remove her sword and knives before sitting at the table.

Was she really pondering etiquette in a dragon's company?

The youngsters squeaked and twittered, jostled closer to the creel. Finna bumped up hard against the farther wall, the rough stone cold and harsh against her back, but her stumbling backward steps bought her hardly any ground at all. The reek of fish and the sudden, bitter taste of terror in her mouth swamped the salt-wrack scent of the sea.

Finna, skewered with fear, could only stand and stare and wait.

Half a barn upon a cliff. Within, a creel, still standing there unopened. On either side, death sublimed and one thin human, locking eyes. Neither paying any heed as hatchlings yipped and bickered at their feet.

The moment stretching to a lifetime, out and out and out...

Finna shut her eyes against the inevitable end.

Nothing. No roar or lunging for the creel, no sudden gnash of lethal jaws. Finna forced her eyes apart, and looked anew.

The dragoness blinked at her, and...crooned?

Finna gazed on, unbelieving, as the Nightmare's legs and wings began to slowly shift. Ungainly here in her cramped lair the dragoness shuffled back, tucked wings and legs close up to her body. The huge head lowered till it rested on the dusty floor, the eyes holding Finna still. With a quiet bark from their dam the hatchlings scurried back to settle quiet beneath a wing.

The Nightmare huffed at her again, softer, no less insistent. Finna felt all speech leave her, but that was quite all right, because the imperative that seized her now did not need words to work. Absently she realised she could have read the dragon's body-language wrong, but even if she had it didn't matter. Something greater and far beyond reason, something deeper lodged and unutterably old, would drive her actions now.

A gentle smile filled Finna's face. Her rigid muscles fell to relaxation. It didn't matter if the dragon was acting deliberately or from deep instinct, for the girl felt no coercion. Nor was she being asked to make a leap of faith. She simply felt the strong conviction of something done together, that she was needed, valued, loved. A growing, glowing certainty that she was in no danger, that many, many like them both had trod this path before.

With easy, unrushed steps she left the meagre comfort of the wall. Moving past the creel she sat right down just by the Nightmare's side. A russet wing curled over her and drew her close.

Finna's notions of reality, already frayed around the edges, dissolved away entire.

* * *

><p>Hiccup stared out into the leaden predawn light. Memories of the mindscape flooded him still, every little detail crystallized. Had he truly slept at all last night? It hardly seemed possible, yet he didn't feel tired at all right now, not one bit.<p>

The young man blinked. How could she end the story there? How could she?

"Melisma?"

Hiccup scrambled on all fours across to where an inky curve of shadow suggested their companion lay. The dragoness was there all right, wheezing on the turf, splayed prone upon her back with legs and wings akimber. Her great pale eyes, staring wide and unfocussed, glinted with the stars.

A gentle nudge, just then, in Hiccup's side.

::Easy, Hiccup, easy. Creating the mindscape takes it out of a dragon. Best leave her be for a bit.::_

::No, no, Toothless...::_

The shadows shifted as Melisma blinked and groaned and heaved herself into a sideways crouch; despite her fatigue the Fury moved her legs and wings with an economy and elegance that Hiccup could hardly fathom. Close by, a faint chirp and an answering human murmur confirmed that Astrid and Viggen were listening in as well.

::He deserves to know; you all do...::_

The Fury hung her head.

::...but I am afraid that what I have to say may scarcely satisfy you.::_

Melisma paused, as if trying to find the words to continue, and for a long moment then there was only the waves and the wind and the scent of the sea. But eventually the dragoness spoke again.

::You trusted me before, Hiccup. Would you trust me again now? Trust me when I say to you that yes, the human kind - or thinskins, as we say - were once our most beloved creations?::_

She breathed deep, sighed out heavily again.

::You were everything to us. Oh, you didn't look like much, not back then. You couldn't speak, could barely walk. Your bodies were covered with fur! But the Vigilants who discovered your ancestors were not concerned with your mean bodies. They only cared that, in the potential of your minds, they saw the pathway to their own redemption._

::You became their greatest cause. The dragons vowed that, through

their actions, they would prove their learning from the horrors of the past. And perhaps, in time, they might shake loose the binds of all their loneliness, their guilt and their despair. Just think on it, Hiccup! Humanity, the saviour of all of dragon-kind!_

::And so the dragons nurtured you, protected you from hardship and all harm. The clans fell to the task with relish. It became, for them...how would you thinskins put it? Almost - ah, yes! - a sacred endeavour. Down all of those long years they watched you, generation after generation, waiting patiently for the birth of those of you whose minds lit with a stronger gleam than those of all their kin. And the dragons so arranged things that it was those rare individuals, male and female, that would lie together and survive to raise large families -::

"_**WHAT!**_" Hiccup could not restrain himself. Had he really heard her right? "You...you _bred_ us? Like cattle, or like sheep? Or like...like..._dogs?_"

_::__**NO**__, Hiccup!::_

Melisma was instantly on all fours, all tiredness suddenly quite gone away. Her tail lashed; the tip of her urgent snout trembled an inch from Hiccup's face. But then she blinked, as if ashamed at her loss of control; and with that she did pull back a little, though still the tension crackled in the air between them.

::You have it all spun round. We...bred...you - if you really must use that crude term - not to be our pets, or livestock! We sought only to give you the best of ourselves!::

She rose to stand above him in magnificence, wings stretched up and over him and all fins fully flared.

_::We raised you up to be our companions, and our __**equals!**__::_

As he stared at her, incredulous, she folded wings and fell back to her lounge, sensors flat, staring at the turf.

::But you don't see any happy dragon-thinskin families in the world today. Present company excluded, of course...::

She raised her eyes then to smile sadly to each of their small group.

_::...because:: _she whispered, _ ::in this, the noblest of all of their endeavours, the dragons failed.::_

Suddenly Melisma seemed much smaller than she had just moments before. Misery seemed to roll out from her compact, rounded form in dark and heavy waves, and it was fully a score of heartbeats before Hiccup could bring himself to speak again.

"Tell us, Melisma", he said, quietly. "Tell us how it happened."

Her great eyes lidded shut, and her voice was but a murmur in his mind.

::I cannot.::

Hiccup wasn't having it.

"Oh c'mon, Melisma. Cannot, or will not? Which is it?!"

She raised her head to stare at him in silence, her pupils thinning to ambiguous half-slits, and as he glimpsed the gleaming teeth half-concealed behind her snarl it occurred to the young man - altogether too late - that he might have overstepped the mark with her at last. But then she blinked at him, and huffed, and hid her teeth; and with that Hiccup dared to breathe once more.

::I cannot tell you, Hiccup, because I do not know. No dragon does, for none of the Counternamed have ever dreamed of those events. This is the part of our story that is not remembered, not yet told. We only know that our efforts were in some way insufficient or unworthy, for the thinskins came to hate us, and now the dragons hide.::

Hiccup drew a sharp breath. "You mean there's a...a...gap? In what you dream? You dream what came before and after, but not the in-between?"

::But not the in-between. Nicely put, Hiccup. Did you ever think of telling stories yourself?:: She favoured him with a soft smile.
::For Orknoyar, and for the Council, just remember this: Berk aside, the dragons of the world today still live in shame. And Berk aside, they have been hiding from your kind for three thousand long, long years.::

* * *

><p>When Finna blinked and shook her head and dared to look around at last, it was the tapestries of the mead hall that first of all came to her mind.<p>

Anything old in Berk survived only within the stout, stone walls of the mead hall. And for as long as she could remember - perhaps even before she could walk - Finna had loved its richly woven hangings. Never mind the bloody subject matter, the endless panoply of dragon slaughter, for the violent reality of such imagery seldom carries in its fullness to the very young. No, it was the richness of the colours that fascinated the Hofferson girl, the way the stylised, abstract designs tumbled down the yard-wide strips of cloth in ceaseless flow, scale and sword and tail weaving one about the others in hypnotic, lethal dance.

The glittering cascades of orange and vermilion that fell all round her now reminded her of those tapestries. But compared to this living, dancing backdrop, the hanging cloths now seemed to her like musty, faded relics, memorials of a time that was, gods willing, permanently past and gone.

The lights were beautiful, she thought, in a eerie kind of way. So many shades of red and ochre, brilliant and amorphous, shimmering in great translucent curtains as they fell. Entrancing and mesmeric, it wasn't so much that the lights defined and lit this world; they _were_ this world.

Finna tried to focus, and found herself unable. She had no known

reference point, no ready sense of scale. The lights might be dancing right before her eyes, or a hundred miles away. Finna frowned as consternation began to edge in front of her delight.

And then the Nightmare's great horned face poked right through the shining veils. Over Finna's head, a sudden spiral swirl resolved into a wing. The dragoness crouched low, dipped her shoulder, and beckoned Finna with a gentle nod.

Finna scrambled up into her -

::known and rightful::

- place, right up onto that scaly back, right hard up against that long and thick-set neck. She was - she felt - undeniably

-

::comfortable / warm::

Blinking then, she saw her unsaid thoughts - or perhaps emotions, she wasn't really sure - spinning up and away from her in vivid, twisting cyanic rays. That she could perceive of such a thing did not seem odd to her, no, not at all. She was, after all, in a Nightmare's mindscape, so what else should she expect to see right now?

Whoa whoa whoa, just wait a moment. She was in a...what? Or should that be a where?

But then there was a feeling of hush hush coupled with a sense of everything being quite all right...

Her blue-green light met with the dancing reddish curtains. Through some sweet and unknown marvel they seemed to fit and mingle there, filling all the spaces in between, slamming home with an essential force. The blue-green brightened, rippled and expanded, cascading with the red to spread through the entire sweep of her vision.

Immediately the feedback was stronger and more focussed.

::Finna welcome. Safe::

She'd had no idea.

It's like her first climb, edged with fright, up Berk's high peak to see for herself a horizon not quite straight. It's the sharp and sudden autumn-scent in blazing, broken leaves. The tongue-tip tang of cloudberry preserve with winter's drifts outside. The tingle up her spindly arms as she parries Astrid's thrust.

It's all of this, compressed into one moment.

But then she thinks again and knows it's much, much more. It's

-

five thousand feet aloft to see the planet's rim through sharper, keener eyes...the blissful reek of fish-oil as she bites down on the cod...the taint of woodsmoke on her tongue from the other side of Berk...the blissful tremble through her very core as she stretches wings at dawn::

She's never felt less human or more fully whole. She's suddenly augmented, and complete.

Sometime soon, she supposes, she'll find out what the Nightmare's taken in return. Right now, the notion doesn't bother her one bit.

Right now, she'll settle for finding out her new companion's name.

The Nightmare glances back at her with gentle, loving eyes, and smiles.

* * *

><p>::You have to be kidding me. I can't fly in
**that!**::_

The weather had finally broken with the dawn. Under lowering morning light Astrid crouched low upon the clifftop, braced on half-bent knees against the quickening gale. As the wind keened across her scales the Nadder shifted weight from foot to trembling foot, eyeing the heave of the swell and the whitecap lines that raced and raced and dashed themselves upon the shore. As if to mock her in her nervousness a sheet of spume detached itself from off a crest, whipping forwards; an instant later Astrid tasted salt, and blinked to clear the stinging foam from out her eyes.

Taking off wasn't going to be a problem; it was what came afterwards that worried her. At this point she almost wished she was back in the mindscape. Her only consolation was that Toothless, Hiccup and Viggen all seemed just as cagey about the journey that lay ahead.

This lovely winter's breeze was coming, as far as Astrid could judge, pretty much from the north-west. Their desired direction of flight to Orknoyar was south-west.

Melisma cocked her head to the Nadder, sensors perked and thrumming.

::Phah! Course you can. You'll be in Orknoyar before you know it, and with hardly a beat of those pretty wings.::

Set four-square on short and slender legs the Fury seemed quite immune to the wind's buffeting. Indeed, all her muscles seemed to strain in joyous anticipation. Astrid could only stare at her in silence, biting back some uncharitable thoughts about dark dragons who might have a lot of the answers, but none of the social graces to make her own learning curve a little easier to negotiate.

The Vigilant sallied on, cheerfully oblivious.

::Y'know Astrid, not all problems need to be faced head on.::

Oh, great. Now their guide was talking in riddles. The Fury could scarcely be any more infuriating if she tried.

Melisma was fairly quivering now, desperate, it seemed, to get up into the sky, all exhaustion quite gone away. Perhaps all Furys

lapsed to sarcasm and impatience after a few hours trapped upon the ground. Or was the dragon's attitude just some weird backlash from a night spent spinning wild, black tales of slaughter and catharsis?

Whatever the cause, Melisma had clearly reached the end of her tether.

::Oh, just stay there and watch for a moment then!::

The Fury crouched low to the wind and became very quiet. Her stocky neck angled sharply upwards, reaching for the sky; nostrils flared and great wide eyes lidded shut. She stood thus rooted for a second longer, a jet-black mass of stilled perfection, unperturbed by the gale that howled all about them and challenged lesser beings to remain standing.

The long black wings snapped out. The wind caught them with a _crack!_ and in that moment the Fury was gone, flung away in a dark and tumbling whirl. Her dwindling form seemed no more in control of its flight than some scrap of sailcloth ripped from the yard of a storm-tossed karfi.

::Woo hoooooo!::

Melisma's laughter rippled clear and bright across the distance. She righted herself in an instant, angling half-folded wings against the weather's blast to hold position maybe fifty fathoms above their scrubby refuge. Then, as a child might swoop a kite, she began to slip and sidle back towards them, trading height for ground position. Reaching the cliff-top she again surprised them, passing low over their heads and continuing her descent toward the waves below. Melisma dipped into the lee of a crest and started beating strongly, matching her flight to the folds of the waves as she clawed her way upwind.

Astrid and Toothless traded sidelong glances; this flight looked like very hard work. Somehow, Melisma picked up on their scepticism straight away.

::Patience, patience! Just getting a bit of distance from the shore...::

She ceased her crazy flapping, lingering in the dead air of a trough before flexing her wings to catch the wind once more. And just as before the wind took her in its grasp, throwing her up and away from the angry face of the sea. But this time there was no chaotic tumble, just a graceful, curving climb, arrow-quick, that within moments put her within reach of the very clouds. Just before she was lost from sight the Fury stall-turned on a wingtip and hurtled back towards the waves with wings and fins closed tight, a blur of black with the wind behind her, charging back towards the cliffs.

::Now here's the real trick!::

Just above the sea the dark wings shot out once more, locked at full extension. Melisma slewed across the wind in a single movement of pure fluidity, barely losing speed, and now the dragon hugged the windward face of a swell, as one with the wave, her wings canting minutely to her glide. The momentum from the dragon's dive carried

her far, far out across the ocean - and on a distinct sou'westerly track.

The Fury had stolen ground from the very wind itself. It was mesmerising, and it was beautiful, and in truth Astrid couldn't see how it was done.

Once, her lack of understanding would have bothered her insanely. And now? Well, now all she knew was that her own wings had already been folded for far too long.

As Melisma flicked up from the sea to start a second dizzying ascent, Astrid knew it was a challenge that could not be ignored. The Nadder, sensing quick and easy the readiness of her mate upon her shoulders, leapt away to join in battle with the howling gale.

* * *

><p>Viggen
The long glide_

Together we tear forwards in this valley of calm air. The ocean towers on either wing, steep water-walls to crash on down upon us. But Astrid's wings are broad and strong, whetted with the sea and sparkling now in bright defiance. Playfully she clips the foaming wave to splash the Fury riding in our wake.

No need to worry now about her flight. No need to stay alert lest she should slip and stall. Though we dash ahead to meet a fate unknown, you'd hardly know it from my mate today.

She chose a dragon's form above her own. She chose it quick and certain in a dragon's way, no thinskin's thoughtful pause to slow her down. With every passing hour she stretches out to fill my form with easy grace. From tip of snout to tip of tail she is a Nadder now.

My only role: to stretch out flat upon this leather pad, thinskin small and frail to scarcely brake her flight.

A silver flash within my mind, quick as dancing sunbeams on her polished axe of old. Astrid's sinnljÃ's glitters now, adamantine, vital.

Does mine own still shine out bright, as once it did?

* * *

><p>Astrid
The arrow-climb_

The trick is not to use all my wings at all. Just the tips alone will do. Just the tips, flexed just so to break back to the wind that surges just above the rolling wave.

How do I know this, without needing to be told?

Now's not the time to think on that. Now's the time to feel the surge, the tension in my chest, the elation of the blood-rush as we hurtle to the clouds. No effort on my part; I feel no drag. The pull of the ground below is nothing to me now.

The wind's a harpy's scream across my scales. My wingtips thrum and

sing.

Toothless and his rider can't keep up!

* * *

><p>Melisma
Stall-turn_

The world is poised. It trembles, set upon a wingtip, ready to tumble forward or else crash back. Only the days ahead will tell.

Strange that I who sees the dreadful past so well, cannot sense at all the shape of things to come. Except I know they will fall forward, or else back. There'll be no middle way, no easy thermal ride in cloudless skies.

No motion in this moment; the gale is strangely still across my fins. Pivoting, I fold my wings tight shut. The wind finds me again, firm and strong upon my back. My speed picks up into the dive, inevitable, unstoppable. Orknoyar edges ever nearer.

Do I fly us now unto deliverance, or oblivion?

* * *

><p>It was somehow reassuring to see an actual scene emerging from the veils. Something tangible for Finna to lock onto, other than the close, warm body of her friend beneath her thighs.<p>

Not a single human in sight. No boats, no village. Only a cavernous gaping chasm, filled with lurid light and smoke and dragons.

A scene remembered by her friend? Finna squinted closer then, and gasped.

::That's you there, isn't it? That smaller hatchling, right there in the middle. Your scales are so distinctive, just that shade...::

The Nightmare blinked at her, and nodded.

::Well, I suppose the Nest must've been a cosy place. Crowded, though - so many dragons here! I can see why you chose the barn instead...::

Her friend gave a noncommittal grunt.

::Oh, look at that! Your brothers just lit up. Such pretty flames! I had no idea you could do that from so young! Ha, just look at them, they look so smug...::

That comment earned a sadly rumbled moan, and when Finna looked again she saw the middle hatchling turn and back away, no sign of flames at all. An image of _::a slack-winged Nightmare standing all alone upon the shore::_ welled up, and Finna's breathing hitched.

Her friend had been the runt of this litter, and cursed to boot with uncooperative flame. To a young Nightmare it must have been a double stigma.

::Oh, no. Oh, I'm so sorry...::

::Do not be. It happens, sometimes.:: The voice of the dragoness rolled through Finna like the gentle ripples of a summer sea might rock a dinghy safe inshore. But then the Nightmare huffed, and there was the edge of an old, tired bitterness in that simple sound._
::Still, ever after, I was_ _LÃ¥ngsam Kol_ _to all my kind.::_

_::_LÃ¥ngsam Kol.::_ Finna rolled the words around her mind. They had a lumpy, ugly feel whichever way she tried them, not fit at all for a creature of such elegance and beauty.

::They called you Slowflame?::

The name was at least half an insult, she was sure.

::You are close enough.:: The feeling was of resignation now.
::Yes, I will be Slowflame for you, if you like.::

::No, I don't like! That doesn't sound like you at all!::

She thought back then on all the times she'd met with the dragoness in the barn. So tolerant had the Nightmare been of Finna's young naivety, so patient and so trusting; how many of the villagers could she think of who would act the same?

It was not a very long list.

Perhaps it was not that long a list among dragons, either. This was a special dragoness; yes, Finna was keenly certain of it now. A dragoness who carried all her strength and heat within, not wasting any of it in some mere flashy show.

::You're plenty warm on the inside, I think...::

The creature misnamed LÃ¥ngsam Kol turned to her with questing eyes that seemed to light with some eternal glow. It spoke to the girl of
-

::comfort and security...::

Of family. Of home.

::Vikings aren't like dragons,:: Finna started, hesitant and slow, defining her thoughts as precisely as she could. The Nightmare's eyes, curious now, never left her own. _::Our bodies can't make fire inside like yours. So when the days get short and cold we have to make a fire elsewhere.::_

The hearthfire was the living heart of every Viking home. It kept the people warm, it cooked their food, its rich smoke cured the herrings hanging in their roofs. And with its reddish glow it fended off the evils of the night while songs and stories traded round and round.

The villagers all worked hard to earn their winter warmth. With aching backs they cut the peats in spring, then dried them on the hill all midge-filled summer long. When at last the heath glowed bright with heather-bloom they lugged their prize back home in cart

and creel. And then they burned those peats and kept the hearthfire in, no matter what the winter threw at them.

There was a special knack to that last bit. A way to stack the peats _just so_, just as the day wound down, the blue clods densely packed inside, the mossy ones on top. And when the morning came they'd rake the snow-white ash aside, and there would be the embers hidden deep within, forever glowing strong.

_::Ember.::__

Finna rolled the name around, and found it had no sharp edges at all. The Nightmare's very body shook with her approving croon.

And then a very Viking shout, raw and raucous, rent the dreamlike beauty of their world.

* * *

><p>Hiccup was getting better at reading wind and waves. And to flying blind.<p>

He wasn't exactly new to north Atlantic storms, of course. Growing up on Berk you quickly learned to keep a weather eye, for those that didn't might not live long enough to grow up much at all. And flying with a Fury for the past six months had sharpened his sensitivity to the wind a hundredfold.

But flying over open ocean, far from sight or scent of land...well, this was something altogether new. The deity of western winds held single lordship here, and he was a capricious, unforgiving master. In one short breath he'd gladly give his strength to aid your flight, and with the next he'd blind you in a sleet-filled squall.

Still, even in the whiteouts Hiccup wasn't truly without sight. He just hunched lower in the saddle, flung his arms about his dragon's neck, and read the Fury's shifting muscles without conscious thought. The tailfin clicked and shifted like a thing alive.

More than half a day aloft, and most of it spent in a dizzying, endless cycle of glide, climb, and stoop. The dragons didn't seem unduly fatigued, but now the daylight was starting to fade, and Hiccup was more than ready for this flight to be over. Toothless was up to his skin-warming tricks again, so at least the young man didn't feel too cold, but there wasn't much the dragon could do about the dull ache in Hiccup's backside, nor the wind's blast on his chapped and numbing face.

The latest of the sleet-fronts passed. Hiccup wiped his eyes and dared to crouch a little higher, scanning the fuzzy far horizon where the grey of sea merged imperceptibly to grey of sky. A blur of blue and yellow flickered past: Astrid, obviously competent and still full of energy, revelling in her flight. The Nadder flipped up fast above the fury and his rider, matching speed; then flicked a quick half-roll to glide inverted. Astrid glanced down to Hiccup with laughing eyes and lolling tongue, while Viggen, clipped in tight, flung her arms wide to the wind and met his gaze with a grin to match her mate's.

All right, Hiccup thought. That's new.

His own dragon's eyes slewed up to him.

::I do hope that we get there soon. Those two are going to be insufferable otherwise.::

Smiling, Hiccup focussed again on the far distance. He thought he'd caught a glimpse of something there before, an perturbation in the endless grey. Ah yes, there it was again, just off Toothless' left wing: the suggestion of an off-white smudge atop a charcoal blur.

Melisma slid up towards them.

::It's HÃ¡ey, Hiccup. Big enough to make its own cloud. Means we're through the worst of all this weather. This wind should ease off for us now.::

And sure enough, by and by they were able to return to normal flight, keeping low - just as the seabirds did - to ride the cushion of still air that clung above the sea's now calming face. The prospect of their journey's end seemed to sober up the Nadder-human pair, for Astrid ceased her antics and formed up neatly on Melisma's left wing, mirroring Toothless on the right. They pressed on like that together, a tight and silent echelon of black and yellow-blue streaking forwards under a grim sky.

Before them Orknoyar rose up from out the sea in ghostly monochrome, a herd of low and rounded humpbacked spectres perched atop the far horizon, fragile islands barely borrowed from the waves. The definition tightened as the distance closed, and soon they streaked down North Sound, Sandey's impossible golden strands on their left side, Hrolfsay's looming bulk ahead.

Orknoyar was no Berk archipelago, Hiccup saw at once. Berk was all sharp edges, cliffs and stacks and promontories, defiant salients against the ocean's wrath. Orknoyar had cliffs too, or so he'd heard, but on this approach it was the horizontal aspect that dominated as the islands showed their gentler face. Slick with oily light the layers of steely sea slid through the layers of land, intermingling with them there like two old lovers - or perhaps old enemies - twining hands.

Pinpricks of light began to flicker along a fast-approaching shore, and Hiccup caught the pungent whiff of peat-smoke on the breeze.

:: Follow me close,:: was Melisma's curt instruction. _::Meginland approaches. We fly hard and fast from here. You cannot Shadow yet, but I will see to it that we are not observed.::_

They powered across a low and stony beach, and without hesitation sped on inland. Hiccup barely had time to glimpse the longhouses ranged along the shore, the capacious barns, the treeless patchwork fields of arable and green. Orknoyar was renowned for fertile soils; the Norse who had settled here were farmers first and fishers a poor second.

And there were lots of Norsemen here. Hiccup, whose whole world had been just Berk, could only baulk and stare at the sheer extent of settlement. It hardly seemed possible that their group would not be

spotted, yet every single person they encountered seemed to look the other way, and the dragons passed above them undetected.

They climbed to top a broad and rolling heath, unsettled and untamed and glowering near-black there in the failing light. Passing its low summit they glimpsed, a little way ahead, two great mirrors of freshwater, dully-gleaming. They were split by what, at this range, seemed to be a low and knife-thin tongue of land.

::That is our destination: BrÃ°ar-jorÃ°, and the great stone Gathering-Ring - ::

But that was all the explanation Melisma managed to get out, for just then the air exploded with a piercing shriek and a tumult of scarlet wings and stocky, blood-red thighs. The unknown Nightmare, plunging high-speed from above, flung out its feet and claws as it shot past, catching Astrid's flank a dreadful raking blow. The attacker vanished in a blink, but Hiccup heard the leather snap, and suddenly Nadder, rider and saddle were all apart and tumbling chaotic and headlong.

Melisma snapped out a bark, banked sharp over and drove her wings down hard. She plucked Viggen from the air with feet to spare, then flared her wings and fins to make a ragged landing on the shore. But there was no helping Astrid, still tumbling in a blue and yellow blur. For one heartstopping moment Hiccup caught his friend's eye and saw the rampant fear and panic captured there. He thought, aghast, that she must hit the rocky lochside edge, but her forward momentum proved just enough, and Astrid struck the shallows in a terrible eruption of flailing wings and spray.

* * *

><p>AN: Synopsis: chapters 1-9

The Berk midwinter festival approaches, and Astrid wants to give something special to her Nadder companion, Viggen. Hiccup helps the young woman with that. As things turn out, dragons don't have much desire or need for material things; all that Viggen wants is Astrid's absolute trust.

Astrid pledges it, and is transported to a world of telepathic dragons and their ways. Unfortunately Viggen gets a bit carried away, and she and Astrid accidentally end up in each other's bodies. Cue embarrassment for Astrid, and impromptu flying lessons during which she manages to invoke a raw, untrained form of telepathy which spooks all of the village dragons to riot. For the first time since the great Queen's death, Berk burns by way of dragon flame.

Melisma, a strange new Fury complete with tattoos and rather amazing flight ability, makes a dramatic appearance. Apparently some sort of guardian or watcher (she calls herself a 'Vigilant'), she persuades Hiccup that all the village dragons need to leave Berk for a while, for their own safety. Hiccup gets the village dragons to depart, and then reveals to his amazed father that dragons are intelligent, communicative beings, not just the glorified pets that the villagers imagine them to be.

Our core party of five (Toothless, Hiccup, Astrid, Viggen and Melisma) depart from Berk too. Later that night Melisma teaches them

about 'shadowing', a mind technique that allows dragons - except those from around Berk - to go un-noticed. Toothless also discovers that there might be more to Melisma than meets the eye. The next morning marks a breakthrough for Astrid when she realises she prefers the Nadder's body to her old human one.

Back on Berk, Stoick breaks the news of Astrid's departure to her parents who, in the absence of further information, seem ready to blame the dragons. Astrid's younger sister, Finna, seeks solace in the company of her secret friend, a gentle Nightmare who didn't leave with the other dragons, and who has built her nest in a ruined barn within the village.

Melisma points out how unique Astrid and Viggen's achievement is. She insists that she, Hiccup and the gang need to fly to a Council of senior dragons which is currently underway in Orkney. The young man is impatient with the limited information he's getting from the dragoness, and presses her to tell all of her story. That night he gets to hear it in the 'dragon way' - through mental images of scenes from the dragons' distant past. Melisma is shown to belong to the 'Countername', a clan of rare dragons that's able to dream of long-past events, and so to guard the history of their species. She reveals that, millions of years ago, dragons carried out a terrible genocide against some of their relatives, and that ever afterwards all dragons lived with the guilt and shame of that ancient crime. Only the discovery of early, still-evolving humans gave the dragons any hope - for those primitive humans possessed a weak telepathic 'spark', the same trait that long, long before had developed into the dragons' defining ability...

****Themes in chapter 10****

- Species uplift: a trope made famous by David Brin's novel 'Startide Rising'.

- Complementary colours in the red-green-blue colour model.

- Dynamic soaring: the cyclic flight pattern demonstrated by Melisma - glide, climb, stoop, repeat - is how albatrosses fly around the south Atlantic with very few wing-beats or energy expenditure. The aerodynamics get pretty complicated, but at its core the technique relies on the fact that windspeed is greatly reduced when you're very close to the surface of a wave. (In fact Nadders are completely the wrong shape for dynamic soaring, and Fury's aren't much better, but hey, artistic licence.)

- Ground effect: the increased lift and reduced drag experienced when a flier is at very low altitude.

****Words, words:****

faðmur - fathom, six feet (Icelandic)

Långsam Kol - literally, 'slow coal' (Swedish)

Blue clods - the best quality, dense and coal-like peats from the bottom of a peat-bank; they often have a dark blue sheen (Shetland dialect)

'Sinnljós' is 'mind-light'. It's a Nadder thing. See Chapter

5.

Háley - high (Old Norse) - the highest island of the Orkney group; modern name Hoy.

Sandey - sandy island (Old Norse) - so named because of its long sandy beaches; modern name Sanday.

Hrolfsay - Hrolf's island (Old Norse) - modern name Rousay.

Meginland - mainland (Old Norse) - the large land-mass at the centre of the Orkney group - modern name Mainland.

Bráar-jorð - earth-bridge (Old Norse) - modern name Ness O' Brodgar.

****Comments on cutting peats for fuel:****

With the soaring cost of other heating fuels, peat-cutting has seen a resurgence in the Northern Isles in recent years.

Everything about using peat as fuel involves long, hard work. You'll find aches in unknown muscles as you cut the damn things, then turn and stack them to dry, and later hump them off the hill. All in, you're looking at a good week's work, maybe more, to see you through the winter.

It's a low-grade fuel. You'll struggle to heat your home with peat alone, even though these days we use nice efficient multi-fuel stoves, not the open fires the Vikings did. And peat produces mountainous quantities of very fine white ash that goes everywhere when you clean it out.

To be honest, the only attraction is that the fuel itself is free. Oh, and the smoke smells kinda nice...

****Orkney (Orknoyar):****

I was lucky enough to live in this diverse and beautiful island group for four years. The quality of the light there is unique, and the seascapes are amazing. I hope I haven't over-cooked the descriptions of them in this chapter.

11. Chapter 11

****A Dragon's Gift****

****Chapter 11****

It was, Adólfur mused, as if the gods had gotten bored one day and, in a pique of ennui that only the immortals might get away with, decided to have a little game amongst themselves. Nothing fancy, you understand, not even anything truly malicious; merely an idle passtime, as it were. Adólfur imagined that the rules of this small entertainment might have run something like this:

"Let's isolate a few hundred souls way out at sea, up in the highest latitudes. We'll toss in the elements " gotta have those! " and

then we'll let these fine folk battle for survival against some unremitting, deadly foe. Dragons, did someone say? Excellent suggestion! Now we'll just let things simmer for a few centuries, and see what species of humanity emerges on the other side."

Yeah. There was a saga in there somewhere. Perhaps someday he'd write it down, before his eyesight faded and the advancing years claimed him for their own.

But in the melancholy of his mind's eye he saw that there could be no happy end to such an intervention. It was unreasonable to suppose that such extremes of circumstance would favour anything other than just one type of man: the kind with violence bred into his blood.

Except, of course, it hadn't.

Adǫlfr Hofferson was that conundrum of a Norseman: he was not, by nature, violent. Sure, he'd killed enough of the scaled beasts in the loathsome days of old, but only to protect his family, his village and his friends. Deep down he hated every sword-strike, every hammer blow; and when Astrid started her ascendance to become the finest female warrior of her generation, her father was torn between outward pride and inner disgust at her accomplishments.

He was a trapper, so yes, his livelihood came from killing. But again, it was done from necessity, not desire. There was a reason Adǫlfr set his traps at such far removes from Berk, and so far off the beaten track. For when he made a grateful prayer to Ull with every hare and beaver in a trap or snare, he was certain that his leaden sadness showed clearly in his face, and he didn't care to explain to others how he felt. But his knife was always kept the keenest of any there on Berk, the better to grant each victim a quick and clean dispatch.

Still, any man could be pushed too far.

He'd already lost his Astrid to the dragons. Just seen the houses of his neighbours reduced to charcoal and to ash. Lain wretched and awake most all night long, and when he stumbled sleep-robbed and clumsy out of bed into the dismal light of dawn, it was to find his younger daughter gone as well.

Stoick joined him on his frantic search that morning, but Finna was nowhere to be found. Even so, they almost left the barn unchecked, so unlikely a prospect did it seem. And so it was that, when Adǫlfr and his chief did negotiate the cliff's sharp edge to glance inside the ruin, it was more in desperation than in hope.

There was a mass of russet dragon in the barn, altogether too close for comfort, all fangs and legs, wings and stocky torso. The great beast filled their view. The Nightmare was purring, head just off the ground and swaying slowly side to side, the eyes half-lidded and unseeing. And up there on the neck, pretty as you please, perched Adǫlfr's darling younger daughter, her face a mask of rapt contentment her father couldn't remember ever seeing before.

Adǫlfr's blade flashed into his hand without a conscious thought.

"FINNA!"

And then everything happened far too fast.

The Nightmare was instantly awake, eyes snapping open with pupils cold and narrow. The dragon's body tensed into that hard-edged battle-stance of awful memory, wings jerking up and out to strike sudden puffs of lime from the walls to left and right. Back in the half-light of the barn's far end, small ghostly shadows scritch and scrambled up onto the spines.

A guttural roar rose up to fill the father's ears. He caught his daughter's eyes, appalled to find them lit with just the same ferocity and outrage as filled the dragon's own. His child flung her body low upon the scaly neck, clinging tight with arms and legs encircling round.

A reddish hindleg flashed out in the gloom. The claws tore through an old hay bale lying tumbled there, then whipped forwards. The gusting wind snatched up the talons' load, and the world burst apart in a blinding, dusty cloud of chaff and yellowed straws.

Finna and her dragon shrieked as one, and exploded from the barn in a blur of ochre fury.

* * *

><p>It was only fragments, afterwards, that Astrid could recall.<p>

Her side ablaze with pain, the water's icy sting â€|

â€| _a dragon's wing beneath her own, lifting and supporting
â€|_

â€| _staggering and stumbling forwards, collapsing, trying once again
â€|_

â€| _dark of heather heath, stark stone sentinels tall against a
moonlit sky â€|_

â€| _her mind awash with turquoise haze, dashed through with shards
of brightest crimson, there and gone just like a dream on waking._

* * *

><p>"AdÃ°lfr!"<p>

Hard fingers bit into his shoulders, cutting through the numb as he knelt there on the turf.

"AdÃ°lfr, listen to me!"

It was his chief, he dimly knew. He ought to pay attention. But none of that seemed to matter any more.

His daughters, lost to dragons. Both of them.

The clifftop was right there, so very close, but he felt no vertigo.

Indeed, the void seemed almost to beckon to him now. Who should question his choice?

But then his chief's arms slipped beneath his own. AdÃ°lfr let himself be hauled back to his feet, to follow all unseeing in the big man's steps, trudging in shock and utter fatigue back the way they'd come.

* * *

><p>::How _**dare**_ you! Let _**go**_ of me!::_

::Oh, I don't think so, Pragaras. Not just yet.::

::Perversions! Obscenities! And you bring them here, to taint this Council!::

Viggen cursed her feeble human eyes that, in this thin and pallid moonlight, permitted her to see by greyscale only. Vaguely she was aware that she stood within a great stone ring, perhaps fifty faÃ°mur across. Three-score slabs, each roughly hewn and standing Nadder-tall, defined its perimeter. A dozen dragons stood within, all staring at a Nightmare male writhing in the peaty turf at the circle's very centre. He squirmed there in the gloom, as if to back away. But a pair of grim-faced Gronckles blocked his path to either side; the nearer frowned and squinted, and immediately the Nightmare shrieked, his body wracked with spasms.

Melisma lowered, a mass of shadow, just over the Nightmare's head.

_::The disgrace is yours and yours alone, Pragaras. Your arrogance and cowardice is a shame upon us all.:: _

The mind-pinned Nightmare managed a snarl, though the effort seemed to cost him dear. _::I p-protect all dragons â€" the means are mine alone to choose! Your fondness for the t-thinskins fogs your judgement, Melisma! Your actions will bring our world to ruin!::_

A Zippleback leapt in fast. The twin heads loomed and hissed, and in the face of that the Nightmare cringed and shrunk back on himself, quite small upon the turf.

::No,:: Melisma cried out. _::By all means let him speak. We will grant him the voice he sought to deny to my companions.::_

Pragaras slowly raised his head, blinked, and swept a wide-eyed gaze around them all. _::You all heard her!::_ And then to the Fury, spitting out the words: _::So it's _**companions**_ is it now, Melisma? Tell us, when did the notion of this wretched betrayal first occur to you? While puffing on the thinskins' weed, perhaps?::_

He snorted then, and sneered.

_::In its foolishness this Council granted you great leeway, Melisma. Permitted you to watch over Berk and its human _**friends**_ to dragons, even stayed its claws as _**those two **_â€"::_ He tossed his head at Hiccup and Toothless. _::â€" joined as one. And now your complacency brings us _**this**_!::_

Viggen gasped as the Nightmare fixed her with a narrowed gaze. Never before had she felt more isolated than in this moment. If only her Astrid was awake right now!

But Pragaras' eyes widened then.

::Oh, but wait nowâ€¦|::

His eyes gleamed, and a shimmer of pale flame raced briefly down his back.

::I wonder. Is there more to it than just weakness and incompetence, Melisma? Getting on a bit now, aren't you, for a Counternamed? How many seasons do you have left, Fury? Makes me think... oh yes, of course!:::

Again he turned to look around the greater company.

::A fine legacy it would be, no doubt, for a dying Fury â€" if she could bring it off! Dragons living free from Shadow, mingling with the thinskins once again! Such songs that would be sung in her remembrance!:::

Melisma's eyes went wide as well, all sensors up, but her wings drooped at the shoulders. Pragaras continued on, relentless:

::It is futile, surely you all must see that? But she doesn't care. She acts only from prideful folly, even as she fades, for she knows she won't live long enough to see the dragons fall!:::

::THAT'S ENOUGH!:::

There was complete silence in the circle as Hiccup stormed up to the prostrate Nightmare.

::I've heard enough poison from you right now! You don't even know us, yet still you attack us, you insult us â€" just like the folk of Berk behaved to dragons while the Queen still held her sway!:::

Viggen gasped at the audacity. But hadn't Melisma said his name was weighty, now, among the Council? Viggen earnestly hoped the Fury had been right.

::The thinskinâ€¦|itâ€¦|it speaksâ€¦|:::

It was Pragaras again, his voice now small and shocked.

::That's right, Pragaras. I speak, as dragons do.:: Hiccup glared at him, then glanced all round the circle. _::It was a gift to me, a great gift from the dearest friend that ever I shall know, here in Midgard or in any other worlds to come.::_ The great wedged head of Toothless nudged firmly under his arm, and at that the young man's face broke briefly into a grin, taking the edge off his intense and serious demeanour. The Fury's body thrummed hard to his purr. _::And if you'll only listen to me now _â€" oof!:::_ Toothless had flicked his head, landing his rider squarely in the saddle with a thump. _::_â€" _I would tell you such a story, a tale of one fool boy who chanced to down a dragon; of how that dragon forgave him, and then saved him, and gave to him the skies.::_

Hiccup's words were humbler now, calming, almost serene. But then Toothless' wings and fins snapped out, and suddenly in Viggen's mind it wasn't _::Hiccup::_ and it wasn't _::Toothless::_ anymore. Nor was it some maimed human and a flightless Fury. It was _::Dragon-with-Rider::_, one fused entity of unlimited potential, and in that moment Viggen knew that nothing in the world could stand against them.

The Vigilants, it seemed, could sense it too.

::...never have I seen...::

::...how... how is it even possible...::

_::...the tail? Really? With his __**foot**__?::_

Pragaras spoke up one more time, but his voice was high and edgy now:

::Dragons, do not be mislead! It is nothing but a trick!::

But a jet-black Nadder stepped up then, slammed one great foot down right by the Nightmare's neck. _::Mica, Vigilant to the Southern Oceans, has flown long airs and hard to attend this Council.::_ Her voice was cold and steely-clear, a fall of snow on ancient ice. _::And she, for one, would hear this human speak.::_

Viggen's heart thumped, altogether too loud, as it seemed to her, there amid the silent dragons. But _::Dragon-with-Rider::_ was still there, strong and swelling, rippling like a living thing to claim all that stood within the stones.

At last, uncertainly, and rather quietly

::Very well...::

::Yes, I will hear him...::

::Agreed...::

Viggen lets go of a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding, just as Melisma nodded curtly to the Gronckles.

::Graben, Tephra, would you be kind enough to escort our friend elsewhere? I do not think we can trust him to remain civil.::

A gruff grunt. _::Our pleasure.::_ And then, to the wretched, writhing form between them: _::What will it be, Pragaras? You play nice, you get to walk. If not, we drag you out unconscious.::_

The Nightmare staggered up, still glowering, and spat a splash of liquid fire into the turf. _::Walk.::_

* * *

><p>AlfdÃ-s had been very quiet at the news of Finna's departure, and in no mood at all to be consoled by male company. She'd only mumbled something quietly, as if to herself, as she drew on her long winter cloak. Something about going over to her sister's for the evening,

she would be there a while...<p>

To a house where, AdǼlfr knew, his wife could lose herself in family, to a home where the walls still rang bright with children's cries.

The trapper and his chief, meanwhile, trudged out through silent woods that seemed to bear the dying light with a sombre, heavy grudge.

The scrunch of a second pair of boots fell strangely on AdǼlfr's ears: apart from occasional forays with one or other of his daughters, he'd always paced these trails alone. Yet when Stoick had offered him some company to check the traps, AdǼlfr had accepted instinctively and without hesitation. Here, this evening, he didn't trust himself alone.

AdǼlfr's thoughts spiralled back those eight short weeks, back to when he'd stood on that awful shore amid the ash-swirls and the burning boats. With all the rest he'd watched, struck numb, as Hiccup and a Fury flew to render their salvation. With all the rest he'd heard Chief Stoick's low words of contrition and remorse that heralded Berk's new dawn.

It had seemed altogether too good to be true, back then in the aftermath of the tyrant Queen's demise. Such a sudden and complete reversal, the prospects of the village flipped end on end as the dragons calmly came to live in Berk as if they'd never left. At the time, none of the villagers thought to question their good fortune. But now it seemed it might only have been the trick of some malevolent deity, perhaps finding a moment's pleasure in granting the folk of Berk a glimpse of heaven, only to snatch it cruelly from them once again.

Quite why the Hoffersons had been singled out for double punishment remained a mystery. They'd always been loyal to the village, hard-working, respected. He even dared to think that he and AlfdǼ-s had been tolerably good parents; certainly their children had seemed contented, Astrid especially so of late...

Those happy days were still so close at hand. It was far too easy to imagine that at any moment he might still hear his daughter's cries mingling with the musical cackle of her Nadder friend. They liked to dance up there, just above the tree-tops, joyous in their flight...

AdǼlfr and Stoick skirted a muddy glade, the gap within the wood still fresh and raw with cold, churned earth. Jagged stumps of larch rose stark and white like so many broken, angry teeth. AdǼlfr knew well what had happened to those trees: they'd gone to build an improvised extension to the Hofferson home, an open-sided lean-to, Viggen's residence on those nights that the dragon chose to spend close to her rider rather than with others of her kind. A Nadder was just too large to be accommodated comfortably inside a human house, and besides, Viggen had shown a lingering nervousness of enclosed spaces.

The shattered teeth, almost shining in the gloom, mocked AdǼlfr now. The trapper lengthened his stride, the sooner to leave the glade behind; following on behind, Stoick matched his pace without a word.

Soon enough they were back amid the close-spaced trunks once more.

What of the future, now?

Truly, AdÃ°lfr didn't know. For the time being, just placing one foot in front of the other seemed accomplishment enough. It was difficult to martial any thoughts at all of days to come, for the road ahead was hidden by a shifting shroud of memories that quickened like a mist to fill his mind.

The birch and larch began to thin, and presently Vragi's Shield began to loom up out of them, the great granite bluff, roseate and gleaming, that served as a natural waypoint for every forest navigator. The first snare was set just up ahead. Good; any task, any small distraction, would be welcome to him now. He strode quicker still, closer to the rough, sheer face â€œ

"We knew that you would come."

* * *

><p>It was agreed: they would wait till morning to hear Hiccup tell his story.<p>

There was no option, really. The physical exertion of the long flight, paired with the trauma of the past two hours, made for a potent mix. Melisma and her party, dragon and human alike, were exhausted.

And standing there in the moonlight, in that strange setting and surrounded by unknown dragons, there was nothing more that Viggen wanted than to nestle close up to her mate and sleep until the glow. But there was a serious impediment to that ambition.

An impediment that took the form of another Nadder, braced up close to Astrid's side.

Viggen was unable to pick up any scent, nor under moonlight could she detect any coloration of the scales. But from the muscularity of the torso and the thicker, longer horn atop the muzzle she knew this dragon for a male.

The once-dragon stood quite still upon her spindly human legs, staring and uncertain and very much alone. Viggen felt a foreign, most un-Nadder-like stab deep down inside her chest. Her mate, curled up with another!

But Melisma, standing close by, only laughed.

::Go on, Viggen. Berylline will not harm you::

Viggen looked again, and saw that the placement of the male's body was not accidental. Lounging on his left side he held his right wing half extended, its crook supporting Astrid's own and folding it gently to her body as she lay against him. Astrid herself was still unconscious, prone and unmoving save for her rise and fall of her shallow breaths.

Pragaras' blow had been to Astrid's right-hand side.

Viggen edged a little closer. The male opened his eyes, flashes of pallid yellow in the gloom. He smiled at her, and then his _sinnljÃ³s_ hit her, and after that there wasn't a single thing that seemed to matter anymore.

Berylline was dichroic.

Amongst her kind there'd long been fables told about these Nadders, but Viggen had never dared to believe any of them might actually be true. She'd certainly never thought she'd live to meet such a dragon in the flesh.

The flaming crimson hit her first, a wall of intense saturation that reminded her of nothing other than flying into the blaze of an autumn sunset. It sang bright and deep of untamed energies, of passions and emotions only barely held in check. It was as far from her sister's gentle, subtle ruby as could possibly be imagined.

But then the flames began to burn away, as if consumed by their own violent heat. What rose up to replace them was a bubbling creamy white, pure and frothy as driven sea-foam, or perhaps some puffing summer cumulus where a dragon could lose herself in dreams.

::Viggen?::

Viggen realised that she was still staring.

::Please? There is space, I think, for you.::

The syllables came to her lilting, with a liquid, rolling timbre. She couldn't place them. Yet there was a lifetime of experience in those strange tones, all calm confidence born of long perspective; and there was respect.

Viggen decided that this was one Vigilant she wouldn't mind spending time with. And so, still without a word spoken, she made her decision there and then.

Moments later she was sinking at last towards a blessed slumber, arms and hands splayed wide against her mate's warm flank, and trusting to the protection of an unknown dragon whose wing folded gently over her. She let herself be carried off upon an endless tide of white and crimson all woven through with Astrid's muted, glittering threads, too tired to seek the destination of the flow.

The night was merciful to her, for she did not dream.

* * *

><p>AdÃºlfr stopped so abruptly that Stoick almost barrelled into him. The voice had come from way up at the summit of the crag, fully five faÃºmur over the tops of the tallest trees.<p>

Finna's voice.

AdÃºlfr gazed up at the high rock face. Eighty feet above them, perched on the edge and staring calmly down, perched the Nightmare that had entranced his daughter.

A dragon, speaking with his daughter's voice?

No; there was Finna now, standing close beside the dragon, hands leaning on the long neck to peer more securely over the edge.

"It's all right, father. Please, come on up. You too, chief." And then, as if as an afterthought: "Best leave your knives."

AdÃ°lfr hesitated, glancing helplessly at his companion. Stoick's expression was unmoving and quite beyond interpretation. But after a few moments the chief gave a small nod, calmly drew the hunting knife from his belt, and lay it on the moss at his feet. AdÃ°lfr stared down at the blade, disbelieving, then back up at Stoick; his chief's face now carried a grim scowl.

"For Odin's sake, AdÃ°lfr, put yourself in her place. What she asks â€" is it so surprising?"

"Chief...?"

"Tsk! Come on, AdÃ°lfr. Think man, think. If that dragon meant harm to Finna, would she still be alive right now?" His words came in a low and muttered undertone, falling on the trapper with a leaden weight. "I grant you, she is a little young. But like it or not she's chosen that dragon, and it her. Don't you want to see your daughter again?"

Put like that, AdÃ°lfr saw he really had no choice at all. Moments later there were two long knives glinting on the forest floor.

The southern face of Vragi's Shield was sheer. But the northern side was scalable, a rough and stony scramble up through clinging blackthorn scrub. The men edged round and started their ascent, hands scrabbling for grip. The father's heart pounded hard, but not from any physical exertion.

The short summit ledge came into view, and AdÃ°lfr saw that Finna had resumed her place up on the Nightmare's neck. The hatchlings still clung on close among their mother's spines. His daughter's choice of rendezvous made sense now: at the first hint of trouble the five of them could launch to freedom from the precipice itself.

AdÃ°lfr dared to look again upon his younger child. She'd always been of dainty frame, same height as Astrid's five-feet-and-change but none of the wiry, muscled build. Finna might, he thought, never be grown enough to wield an adult's shield or spear. Yet here, this eve, she sat astride a Nightmare's russet neck as if she had been born there.

"Father, chief, this is Ember." Finna's words came calm and clear; her palm smoothed across the scales, and the dragon craned its head back to her, crooning low. "You scared her â€" you scared _us_ â€" back at the barn. That's all."

The forest, already hushed, seemed to quieten further still. Everything faded: the trees, the roughness of the granite underfoot, the itchy scratches up his forearms from the blackthorn spines. Stoick might have been speaking to him, some advice, perhaps some warning, but AdÃ°lfr didn't hear him. All existence shrank away,

leaving nothing but the father, the daughter, and the dragon.

AdÃ°lfr wanted nothing more than to dash up to his daughter, to hug her close and never to let go. But he'd already fouled things up once today by acting on gut feeling, so now he forced himself to hold his ground.

"Finna... daughter... I thought I'd lost you. After Astrid â€"

"_Lost_ me?" The girl seemed genuinely puzzled, frightened, even hurt. "Of course you haven't lost me, Dad. Whatever made you think that?"

"When... when I saw you up there before, the way you looked at me on that... that â€"

The Nightmare peered at him closer, eyes narrowing just very slightly.

"Ember, Dad. Her name is Ember."

"Ah, alright, alright, on Ember... well..."

I looked into your eyes, and thought that a demon had stolen your soul for its own. I drew my blade in anger, thinking that my family was gone for good.

"Oh Hel, I jumped to conclusions! I didn't know _what_ to think! I'm, I'm sorry, Finna!"

Finna smiled, swinging herself easily from the neck of her companion to stand close by the great horned head.

"That's fair. I guess we must've looked pretty scary â€" "

AdÃ°lfr startled back with a yelp as the Nightmare nudged his daughter hard, but Finna only laughed.

"Wait you, wait!" And then, to her father: "What I meant to say was... we're sorry, too. For what we did. We're sorry that we scared you. Ember, here... she was just protecting her babies."

As if on cue one of the hatchlings sidled up its mother's back, almost to the neck itself. Finna took a step back, holding out her hands; the youngster crawled into her arms without hesitation, scrambling up quickly to her shoulders.

"She needs somewhere safe to raise them. She thought that place was Berk. Was she wrong?"

"Finna..."

"I don't think she was wrong." She paused then, glancing aside. "Do you know how we found you tonight?"

He had no words, could only shake his head in silence. And so, after a moment, Finna continued.

"You take some good straight wire, no kinks. You measure from your fingertip to elbow, and that's the length to cut. And then you take the pliers and make a little eye, just so. Push the free end through, then take more wire, and form a stop..."

Adäolfr dry-swallowed.

"How to make a stopped snare. First lesson that you taught me, father, first one I remember anyhow. None of the other trappers would bother to make stopped snares, but you did. More humane that way, you said.

"And you always check your snares each day, no matter what. Twice or three times, when you can. You always hate to see things suffer."

Adäolfr let out a ragged breath as the Nightmare shifted slightly, raising a wing. A little pile of bodies was revealed. Two, no three mountain hares, if he wasn't mistaken, and a half-grown wild boar too.

"We checked your snares this time. The boar...well, Ember caught that. It's for you."

Finna reached for one of the hares. With her other hand she drew her own small blade. It might have been scarcely bigger than a penknife, but it was every bit as sharp as her father's, and soon the hare was roughly butchered into smallish lumps. The girl wiped the blade carefully on a tuft of wood-rush growing there, resheathed it, then tucked it back inside her smock.

Finna slowly stepped up to her father, a dragon on her shoulder and chunks of raw flesh on her palm. The mother dragon's neck rose, eyes fixed on her offspring and the man, but otherwise made no movement at all.

"Please, father. They are so hungry now."

For the first time in his life Adäolfr looked upon a dragon hatchling. The scales were cinnabar, and not yet fully hardened; they shone perfect and pristine even in the gathering gloom, for they lacked the scars the marred so many of the adults. The claws were short, just barely formed. No fangs. The little dragon flicked its wings, keeping balance, and Adäolfr was struck by how thin the membranes seemed, how delicate the ribs. How ever would they bear this little jewelled creature in its flight?

Benumbed, hardly knowing what it was he did, Adäolfr took a single bloody lump from the mass held by his daughter. He offered it up, his fingers trembling. A puff of warm air gusted on his knuckles, and all the hairs upon his arm rose up on end.

The hatchling's snout held quiet and still, before splitting wide to grasp its meal in gentle jaws.

* * *

><p>A intoxicating and very human aroma came to her, and for a moment Vigen thought she'd awoken back in Berk, there in the shelter Astrid had built for her, close by her own dear rider's dwelling.<p>

Her mouth watered; the zesty tang of fresh, warm sourdough could not be mistaken. But there was a sharp disconnect between that wonderful scent and her present surroundings. She was still exactly where she was when she'd fallen asleep, still tucked in close by Astrid's side, still sheltered by a Nadder's wing.

::Well, good morning! Awake at last, I see!::

The wing lifted slowly away, and the low dawn rays of the winter sun fell full upon her face. She blinked and squinted, cursing: she'd missed the glow again.

::Thought you might be hungry.:: A kindly yellow eye glanced down to her from a face framed all around with garnet scales._ ::Your friend Hiccup was starving, that's for sure.::_

A pair of sun-bright Terrors danced in on fluttering wings, chittering and squawking to each other and to her. Each clutched a bulging linen bundle in its claws. The little dragons hovered for a moment before her, fanning her face, then deposited their cargos neatly at her feet.

Bannocks and flatbreads. A little earthen pot of blueberry preserve. Some good-sized strips of cured ham, some beef jerky. A waterskin, too.

She knew what these things were, had seen how humans ate and drank. Now this was her food, too. But its provision in this place, and now?

"Don't... don't understand..."

::Snaelit and Sokket here are naughty. Ain'tcha, boys?::

They cackled at him joyously, flew two tight turns around his head, and dashed off out of sight.

"They brought all this, for me? I never thanked them!"

::You'll see them later on, I'm sure. And frankly, they'll have enjoyed, erm, procuring this little lot for you.:: He leaned down then to sniff the feast._ ::Mmm, that jam smells good. Hiccup got blackberry.::_

Viggen's stomach rumbled. She tore a bite-sized chunk from a bannock and stuffed it in her mouth. Then she stuck two fingers deep into the jam, and reached up towards the dragon.

::Ooh, thanks. Don't get to taste this very often.:: Berylline's tongue flicked out to lick her fingers, then his lips. _::Little dragons can Shadow just as well as big ones, you know, Viggen. And for sneaky work Terrors really are the best. They can be a bit unpredictable sometimes, that's the only thing. Like, those two once collected every left sock from every village here in Orknoyar.::_ He gave a trilling laugh._ ::Took 'em weeks. The thinskins thought it was gnomes and trolls.::_

There was no wind, and the midwinter sky this morning was cloudless and translucent. The sun picked up a little strength as it climbed,

striking faint pillars of mist from each of the stones as the dew burnt off. A hint of that same warmth edged into Viggen's skin, and started to chase away the worst of her stress and worry. For after all, she thought, she and her mate were still alive, and she had food, and she was in the company of another of her kind who was, apparently, in a mood to talk.

Viggen's new day suddenly seemed redolent with possibility. But first things first.

Still chewing a mouthful of flatbread and jam "so good!" she scrambled up, intending to check the injuries of her mate. Berylline obliged her, wincing as he relieved the support he'd evidently provided all night long.

"Oh, your wing!"

_:It is just a little cramped. Hiccup said he could make something for Astrid to do the same job. He's clever, that one, with his hands.: _

The scar ran from Astrid's shoulder very nearly to her hip, blood clotting in ugly scabs where the bright blue scales had ripped away. It was a mess, and it would scar, but Viggen saw nothing to suggest that any deeper damage had been done.

_:I'm sorry, Viggen. There's more than just the scar.: _

She glanced up at him, aghast.

_:Astrid sprained her wing-root when she fell. Wrenched the muscles pretty hard. She was lucky, actually; it could so easily have been a break. Still, she'll be here for a good few days, before she's strong enough to fly again.: _

Fresh tension sparked inside here. Her mate, trapped here on an island with more humans than they'd ever seen before? Humans whose attitude towards dragons was, for all she knew, dubious at best?

Berylline picked up on her mood at once.

_:Oh, don't you worry! We'll be quite safe here. Don't even need to Shadow.: _

He raised a wing to gesture at the stones.

_:The circle was created when thinskins and dragons still dwelt as one. They raised these stones together in celebration of their friendship, to be the grandest of all their meeting-places.: _ He sighed, and dropped his wing back down. _:But now the humans of Orknoyar shun this place; to them, it is haunted and accursed. Worse than gnomes and trolls, they say, live here.: _And then, brightening: _ :Oh, but look! Hiccup's going to speak.: _

Viggen followed his gaze, over to the circle's opposite edge. Sure enough, the Vigilants were starting to move closer to the young man and the Furies, the dark dragons flanking him close. Berylline would strain to hear him from here.

"Um... I can ask them to move closer, if you like..."

But her companion only closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Do you not wish to hear Hiccup speak?"

::Mmm no, not right now. There will be time enough to talk with Hiccup later.:: _

He must have caught the surprise in her eyes.

::Oh, there is no doubt the others will accept Hiccup and his dragon now. You and Astrid too, I think. Indeed, there's little need for Hiccup to speak at all, though I suppose it will satisfy everyone's curiosity.:: _

He grunted and shifted slightly, perhaps relaxing a different muscle.

::We're not all like Pragaras, as you've seen. For the rest of us... well, we saw pretty much all we needed to, the instant Hiccup sat upon that Fury's back. No, Viggen...:: _

He took a deep breath as he regarded her, flexing the spines along his tail.

::...this morning, I would prefer only the company of another Nadder. I have been separated for so long, you see, from others of my kind.:: _

Viggen couldn't imagine what he meant; after all, Astrid was still very much unconscious. But Berylline smiled gently to her then.

::You, Viggen. It is with you that I would speak.:: _

Viggen's heart surged. He knew, he understood, and she didn't need to explain!

::As it happens, I was about to show Astrid the skies of my own posting. It'll keep her mind active, help her recover faster. But I'm afraid she won't be very good company, at least not for a little while. Would you join us, Viggen?:: _

"Yes! Yes! I have so many questions!"

::As do I, Viggen. As do I.:: _

* * *

><p>Sometimes the marriage between risk and necessity is so tight that even the sharpest blade won't fit between them.<p>

Stoick had made sure to arrive at the Hofferson barn good and early the next morning. Sure enough, AdÃ°lfr and his wife were still abed, the hunter's snores carrying clearly from their house beyond. How did AlfdÃ°s manage to sleep through it, night after night? It was a puzzle Stoick would never figure out.

Still, he could chuckle somewhat now, grateful to his friend for

providing all the reassurance he needed at this point.

"Good man, AdÃ°lfr. Good man."

He was a good man. Just as kindly and forgiving as his good wife, who had, with minimal persuasion, chosen to focus on her joy at Finna's safe return, and not the fact that her younger daughter was bedding down in a barn with three young Nightmares and their dam, just like any other of that kin.

Stoick's knuckles rose to tap, just lightly, upon the heavy doors.

"Finna? Ember?"

A grumbling rumble came back in response, carrying with it the edge of wariness and warning, and Stoick wondered if he'd made the wrong choice after all. But a moment later, Finna's slurred and sleepy voice was faintly heard as well.

"Who â€" who's there?"

"It's Stoick." He nudged the doors apart a crack, just wide enough to whisper through. "Only me. Please, Finna, may I come in? I'd really like to talk."

Silence. His innards churned. But, then, reluctantly:

"Come on in..."

He dared to breath again, began to edge inside. "Thank you, Fin
â€"

"No blades!"

Stoick froze. Thank the gods he'd remembered.

"No weapons, Finna. None at all."

Another moment's hesitation. His heart thumped.

"Well, alright then..."

There was barely any light inside the barn. Finna's voice seemed to be coming from somewhere over near furthest corner.

"We will leave, chief. If we have to. We don't want to, but..."

But they could. Of course they could. The dragon would protect her, hunt for them both, take them anywhere they desired. At thirteen, Finna had no need of Berk any more. Not with a dragon by her side.

But â€" for now at least â€" she chose to stay.

Stoick could just make out the form of an old milking-stool propped slantways on the flags. It would have to do. He dragged it to him, wincing at the scrape of wooden legs on stone, and carefully sat down.

"No-one wants you to go, Finna. Not you, or Ember, or any of her babies. You're all of you quite safe here." He gave a heavy sigh. "I wish there was something I could do to help you believe that."

No reply. He shifted his weight on the stool. It really was too small for him; the wooden edges bit into his rear.

"How's this barn for you, anyway? Sleep well?" He forced a smile into his voice, but he knew the strain will carry too. Completely defenceless and practically blind, he'd willingly entered the lair of a Nightmare female and her brood. Was he insane? "Bit less drafty than your last, I think."

"The barn's fine, chief." There was still an edge of suspicion to her voice. He couldn't blame her for that. "Where's Mum? And Dad? Why are you here alone?"

"Well..."

Where had this new Finna come from, all thirteen and assertive?

Oh, right.

Dragon.

Stoick cleared his throat, which had suddenly gone very dry. "_Ahem_... well, like I said, I'd like for us to talk. Just us, for now. This is very important, Finna."

Silence, but for a subtle _sssssh_ of scales on stone. The dragon was paying full attention, too.

The dragon. It was as good a place to start as any. The best he could come up with, anyway.

"It was a brave thing Ember did, back there on the Shield. Trusting your father with one of her babies like that. Never would have thought of it myself, but it did the trick. It won your father round."

He took a deep breath, as ready as he'd ever be for the plunge.

"It was clever, too. And I wondered, afterwards â€" which one of you was it thought it up? Was it Finna Hofferson's idea, or her dragon's?"

That earned a gasp from the girl, and suddenly Stoick could make out the Nightmare's eyes, wide discs of red-gold staring at him full-on.

He couldn't stop now, though the words threatened to cling there in his throat.

"Hiccup spoke with me, Finna, the night that all the dragons left. We didn't talk for long. But he said, he said..."

C'mon man, you've come this far!

"He said that dragons are a people, just like us. Just as smart."

And...and that they speak."

The red-gold stared him down, unblinking.

"Finna, I need to know. For the good of Berk, dragons and vikings both, I have to know. Have we really been so wrong about them, down through all these years?"

* * *

><p>Author's Notes:

For a moment there, I thought Finna was going to morph into Daenerys Targaryen. Whoops.

The Vigilant's meeting-place is the Ring o' Brodgar, centrepiece of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site. It's an amazing place. The stone circle is thought to have been built about 4,000 - 4,500 years ago; it therefore predates the split between humans and dragons that Melisma mentions in Chapter 10.

I'm trying for some consistency in dragon names:

****Gronckle**** names are derived from volcanic and igneous geology. It makes sense for a species that chews rocks and spits them out as larva, and Gronckles do look vaguely rock-like anyway. Besides, geological words just sound... really cool. To me, anyway.

****Nadders**** are named after minerals and gemstones, in line with the colour of their mind-light (*_sinnljÃ's_*). Berylline is unusual in that it alternates between red and white, so his name is based on the mineral 'beryl', some types of which are dichroic; that is, they can appear as different colours, depending on the angle of viewing. (Viggen and Astrid don't follow this convention, as they were named by humans, not dragons.)

****Nightmares**** have names based on different kinds of fire, hinting at aspects of their personalities. Thus, Pragaras means 'inferno' in Lithuanian, reflecting his fiery temper. Before Finna re-named her, Ember was *LÃngsam Kol*, 'slow coal' in Swedish, suggesting her mild and tolerant nature.

****Terrors**** have traditional dialect names for the fleece colours of Shetland sheep! [www . clrc . ca / 30shetlandcolours . pdf](http://www.clrc.ca/30shetlandcolours.pdf)

A big 'thank-you' to all my readers for sticking with 'Gift'. The rest is plotted out, and subsequent chapters should come faster now.

12. Chapter 12

****A Dragon's Gift****

****Chapter 12 ****

"Finna...are you *_certain?* What you're saying, it â€" it scarcely seems possible!"

Stoick's skin prickled, there in the near-pitch blackness of the barn. Pretty much his only points of reference were Ember's eyes, their red-gold still gleaming at him full on. They were the eyes of a being that here, this morning, seemed suddenly more completely alien than anything he had previously imagined.

Stoick had been starting to half-accept that the dragons might be intelligent; such was the measure of the trust he now placed in his son's opinion and assessment. In truth it was a difficult step for the chief, but still he had accommodated it. And having set one foot upon that unaccustomed shore it wasn't, he found, so very hard to turn his vision to horizons farther still; to conceive that the reptiles might indeed have language of their own...could even have words that Stoick and his ilk, with the grace of all the gods, might one day learn to share.

What Finna had just told him, though, seemed to lie firmly in the realm of fantasy and magic.

Finna, no longer quite a girl, not yet quite a woman, and now freshly dragon-bonded... how could he relate? Stoick thought back upon her words. Certainly they'd seemed to come from the exact-same scion of the Hofferson clan he'd known and greeted practically every day in Berk since the day that she'd been born. If she truly was possessed, then whatever demon was responsible was doing a damn fine job.

And yet Finna had assured him that the dragons' tongue â€" though eloquent â€" did not use spoken words at all. And furthermore she'd told him, quite earnestly and in all seriousness, that humans could share it with them too.

"I'd been seeing Ember here for a little while. Back at the barn, before today." Just for a moment a hint of embarrassment had edged her voice, as if Finna suddenly recalled the off-limits status of the ruin. "I suppose I'd come to trust her, and she me, over time. But yesterday, at dawn...what happened then was completely new. I'm not sure, really, how to tell it..."

But she had tried. May the goddess Freya bless her, Finna had tried. The words that passed between the dragon and herself were, she said, just a small part of the whole. Greater by far, more vital somehow, was the sense of rapturous contentment that took her when Ember touched her with her mind...the swarms of thoughts, emotions and images from a life not quite her own, yet freely, even joyfully shared...the sheer instinctive rightness of it all â€"

â€" and the blinding, total certainty that whatever she and this Nightmare were fated to accomplish in their lives, from henceforth they would do so joined as one.

Stoick fidgeted, then restrained himself. Keep calm, he thought, keep calm. Try to put yourself in her shoes. Whatever... transformation... Finna had experienced, the changes wrought upon her were still but one day old. He must try to be as supportive as he could.

"Ember understands your difficulty with all this, chief."

Stoick blinked. Wait, what now? Hiccup had said that Toothless understood human words â€" but this Nightmare, too? And more amazing

still, the creature was thinking about his feelings?

"Finna? Ember... she understands...?_"

"Oh, yes," Finna replied, quite nonchalant, as if it should be obvious. "She hears you very well. The dragons â€" all of them, she says â€" they started to pick up our words pretty fast, once they came to live in Berk. And she sees how strange all this must seem to you right now."

"Umm..." Stoick croaked out. "Okaaay..."

"They can understand our speech. They just can't reply to us that way. Their, um, their throats and mouths don't work that way, I guess. But you can speak directly to her, if you want. She'd like that."

Stoick's mind raced; suddenly the chief was intensely grateful that Ember was the only dragon currently resident on Berk. Still, his next words would be so important. The options stacked up in his mind. What now for Berk, at this new tipping point? What did this Nightmare know about his son, and Astrid, the scores of dragons that had left? What futures had been shut off and denied to the villagers by their own stupid, stubborn ignorance?

But no; none of that would do. Not now.

"I'm so sorry, Ember."

A moment's silence, and then from Finna, whispered:
"Chief?"

"I'm...sorry. For all we did to you and those like you, for all those years and years." He had to take a deep breath before continuing. "We didn't know about that monster, what she was forcing you to do, but that's no excuse. We never even thought to question, to wonder why."

The Nightmare growl-grumbled back at him, the first sound she had uttered since the chief gained admittance to the barn. Stoick nearly fell backwards off his stool.

"Aaah..."

Finna giggled, light and quick. "She knows, chief. Ember knows. What she means to say is...'thank-you'." Then, more serious: "And also, for the dragons' part in all of it...she's very sorry, too."

* * *

><p>To a cursory glance they were just a trio fast asleep, albeit that they made for an odd-looking threesome. A big male Nadder in glittering garnet scales lounged sidelong, legs tucked up tight beneath him. Folded into the crook of his half-extended wing lay a smaller, injured female; and finally, incongruous and vulnerable, one slight but wiry human woman nestled tight between the two.<p>

However, when it comes to dragons, appearances can be deceptive. A more considered inspection would reveal that the trio breathed as

one, and more deeply than regular sleepers ever would; furthermore, an onlooker in possession of the necessary sensibilities would soon see that the seeming-human was, in her mind's eye, fully restored to her true form and rejoicing in her flight, as proper dragons do.

For Viggen had just discovered that fully-realised mindscapes weren't the sole preserve of Night Furies. Berylline wove the fabric of his Vigilant posting with vivid, sparkling threads, and Viggen thought that the world he conjured into being â€" its myriad sights and sounds, its smells â€" was the most beautiful thing that she had ever experienced.

The seas and shores of the north Atlantic bred tough dragons; the airs of Viggen's home skies were unforgiving of unpractised and unwary wings. By contrast, the swelling thermals of Berylline's world buoyed Viggen with superabundant lift, swirled all around her with a warm and fulsome strength. The sun beat down from a cloudless crystal sky, and wherever the rays touched her, Viggen glowed.

Every last spine and scale of her tingled with the heat: either from the humid waves of it that welled up from below, or from the searing light that struck her from above. Even the very air she breathed seemed energised and vital. Viggen filled her lungs with gusto, beat her wings with full, deep strokes, and danced across the sky.

::Hah!::

She just barely registered Berylline's happy chuckle, but paused for long enough to glance over at him anyway. The larger dragon seemed content to merely ride the thermals with long smooth glides and shallow wingbeats; Astrid, her mind still lingering in the dusky realm below full consciousness, kept silent station off his right-hand wing, mirroring the every movement of the male.

Viggen, though, itched to _fly_.

::Go ahead, Viggen. I'd surely want the same, had I been grounded for as long as you.::

And so Viggen cut loose. She climbed and stooped, she banked and rolled and spun just like a giddy firstflight youngling. She didn't stop, in fact, till she was panting hard and all her muscles ached with gladness. Perhaps it won't be so bad, she thought, easing off at last and forming up on the garnet dragon's other wing. If only I can escape to these skies now and then, perhaps living real life in Astrid's human form will be bearable after all.

::Thank you!:: she cried out to the male. _::Thank you so very, very much!::_

::No problem.:: Berylline glanced over his shoulder at her, grinning. _::Happy to oblige. So, Viggen...what do you think of this place? Not too shabby, huh?::_

Viggen took stock.

They were perhaps three hundred faÃºmur aloft, the sea stretching out below in a carpet of saturated, brilliant cobalt, the colour quite alien to Viggen's northern eyes. The water was flecked, not with the

whitecaps to which she was accustomed, but rather with a multitude of small thinskin vessels sporting odd three-sided sails, swift elegant craft that made the Vikings' square-rigged karfi seem positively dumpy. She discerned a mainland shore, just visible in blue haze on the far horizon. And between that and her were islands " oh, so many islands! " scattered through and through that impossibly blue sea. Islands large and small, some flat, some hilly, some of pure white gleaming stone, still others wooded. Astrid spotted towering cliffs and stacks that seemed to beckon to her wings; she picked out broad embayments with shallows of the brightest jade; and there were beaches, silver-sanded, where a dragon such as she might take her ease.

::Berylline...what is this place? I've never seen anything like it!::

::In that case, my intrepid northern friend, you should definitely travel more. Four days flying south and west of Berk will bring you here. This is how the place appears in summer; it gets a good deal greyer in the winter, I'm afraid. As to its name...well, some tribes of thinskins round here call it Archipelago, but it'll always have another name to me.::

::Another name?::

He was silent for a moment then, and Viggen thought she sensed a little darkness tinge the larger dragon's thoughts.

::Well...let's not spoil the moment. I'll show you later, if you like...::

But Viggen was already distracted by the nearest island in their view.

::Ooh, I want a closer look!::

Obliging her, Berylline let the air slip from his wings, spiralling gently down. Eagerly Viggen explored; up close, the white rocks seemed to shimmer and to blister in the heat, the thermals surging to her so strong and gusting that she had to make quick adjustments to dump the excess lift. Strange heady scents from the hard-baked land suddenly roiled up and over her, the oily aromatics dizzying in their intensity.

::Lavender, Viggen. Lavender, and rosemary. Good stuff, yes, but best enjoyed in smallish doses; I've seen dragons get addicted to the smell, and it never ends up well.::

They meandered on from strand to strand, Berylline seemingly content to favour her inquisitiveness, though Viggen was certain he'd seen it all before.

It was, she thought, a dragon paradise. And to think that she was experiencing...well, all this, after all her trepidation of meeting with the Vigilants!

Viggen determined a few things then. She and Astrid would learn to Shadow properly, and then she would travel, with her mate, as soon as both of them were able. And furthermore she'd do anything remotely in her power to stay on the right side of the considerate and

generous Berylline, who had somehow earned his place to watch over this exalted station against goodness knows how much draconic competition.

Oh, and thinking of Berylline...

They were still flying in that shallow V formation, and Viggen's position just behind the male and off his left-hand wing provided the perfect opportunity for what she had in mind. Keeping her head pointed straight ahead, she risked a sidelong glance towards the larger dragon.

The colour of his scales was what drew her eyes at first. They were not, as she'd previously thought, a uniform deep garnet red. Under this bright light his upper wings shone vermilion, a dazzling beacon to hold the gaze in any land or sky. His deep torso graded more to russet, the colour brightening and darkening as the massive flight muscles tensed and then relaxed. The neck and head, more thick-set in his gender, gleamed as golden-brown as beech leaves in September's sun; the same luminous hue was mirrored down his tail.

And his flight...

Viggen had always thought herself an elegant flier, as buoyant and graceful in the skies as any of her peers. Berylline made her think again about all that.

There were no wasted movements, none at all; his wing-chords tight and smooth, his trailing legs held in an optimal line to minimise his drag. So efficient were his wingbeats that he barely had to move his tail to balance each of his strokes.

She was certain, then, that he could fly rings all around her " if he so desired. And yet he bore his perfection lightly, no hint of flashiness or showing-off at all. Viggen had the notion he'd probably be embarrassed to have his skills even hinted at, at all.

::Want to cool off for a bit, Viggen?::

Great spirit of the sky, had she been _staring?_ She felt the flush come unbidden to her muzzle and, as all the spines along her tail rose up on end, her embarrassment was complete.

::Um...yeah::, she muttered, weakly. _::Might be a good idea...:::_

::Well then; I know just the spot.:::

Viggen, her heart pounding, tried to focus on her flying and the sights of this new world " anything, in fact, to distract her from the form of the gorgeous dragon flying right in front of her.

Berylline was taking them more directly now, straight toward the mainland shore. Soon they were crossing the coast; they passed wide rolling lowlands adorned with many strange dark-green trees, small shrubby things spaced evenly amid the dry and yellowed grass. Many humans, stick-like from her height, busied round the trees, tapping at the branches with long thin sticks. ("Olives", Berylline said, mysteriously. "The thinskins use the fruits to make an oil...") And

then up into rugged foothills with scattered herds of sheep and goats, thin ragged specimens with bells around their necks, their shepherds sheltering from the sun under gaunt and scattered pine-like trees; and at last to the open highlands proper, the altitude sufficient now to take the edge off the heat and the humidity.

They rounded a rocky crag, and a lonely little freshwater lake came into view, its inky blackness promising considerable depth.

::Ah, here we are. It's fun to go in feet-first, but since Astrid's here, and still not quite herself...::

The garnet wings beat hard once more, backing wind; Berylline's outstretched feet gently touched the shingle shore in the same instant that his wings stalled. The others followed, and Astrid immediately curled up upon the ground, her head beneath her wing.

::She'll be very happy there for a spell,:: said Berylline, nosing gently at Viggen's mate. _::C'mon Viggen, I can hardly wait!::_

Without delay he strode into the shallows, great waves splashing up all round him; Viggen, doing her best to reclaim some decorum, waded in more slowly. The cool water was an instant balm upon her feet and legs and thighs, and feeling the gravel bottom shelving gently under her claws she again took the big male's lead, pacing out with confidence till the surface lapped her belly. She dipped her head and shoulders, splashing water all across her wings.

::Berylline! This is just...just wonderful!::

Her companion, floating serenely on his back with wings splayed wide, eyes tight shut and tail gently skulling, chuckled at her for the second time that day. The sound of it brought Viggen up short and hard, and she voiced her question as if to herself, not thinking how sudden or callous it might sound to her host.

_::Why _**are**_ you being so nice to us?::_

The male turned his head, got water up his nose, and righted himself in a spluttering flurry of wings and legs and tail.

::Sorry! Sorry! But really, Berylline...before yesterday you'd never even met us. And yet you tended Astrid all night long...sheltered me, and gave me food...shared this amazing place with me today...::

::Would you prefer for me to be unpleasant?:: the other replied, as mild as ever, but not quite meeting her gaze. _::If so, I'm not sure I can oblige you.::_

Viggen cocked her head and looked at him askance, and at that the other closed his eyes again, and sighed.

::You're right, of course; I have ulterior motives. Truth to tell, quite a few of us were envious of Melisma, once news of what was happening on Berk got back to us. After so many years, finally something that might change the world for all dragons, a reason for us to look forward and not back! I suppose...:: He shook his head

minutely, blinking once, and his voice came curiously quiet. _::I suppose I just counted myself one of the lucky ones, there to meet you early on.::_

Viggen felt suddenly lightheaded, the blush beginning to rise up once again; but she fought hard for control, pressing on.

::And... and you don't mind about Astrid and me?:: This was the critical question, and now it was her turn to look away. _::You don't mind what we've done? The...um..._changes_ that've happened, between she and I?::_

::Mind?:: The larger dragon blinked, flinching back a bit. _::Well, I suppose I must admit to a mighty curiosity; you'll understand that, I'm sure! But object to you and Astrid? To so much trust...so much love, shining clear between you?::_ His voice came stronger, now he was committed to this line. _::It would be a hard-hearted dragon, I think, who could object to that.::_

Viggen's thoughts clouded, turning immediately to Pragaras, and â€" just as previously â€" Berylline picked up on her train of thought right away.

::Yes, there are going to be some like him. Some minds won't easily be changed â€" the fearful ones, the ones that like things just the way they've been for so, so long. I guess we'll just have to work a little harder to win them round, won't we?::

The warmth surged up in Viggen stronger still. She didn't trust herself to find the right words to respond, so she just shuffled for a moment and stared at the water's surface. Little ripples danced from her broad thighs, and she watched them travel outward on their way until they met and mingled with those of her companion. Time stilled; the world of Berylline's mindscape hung quietly there, sublimed to gently lapping water, and waited for a thoroughly distracted dragon to recompose herself.

Her face began to cool at last. Viggen raised her head to look again upon her surroundings, and blinked with a sudden realisation.

This world _was_ beautiful, and it _was_ perfect â€" except in one very important regard. She had to ask; she had to know.

::Berylline...where are all the other dragons?::

He turned to catch her eye once more, wings drooping at the shoulders and a surge of sadness welling in his mind; and at that, a memory of his recent words came back to her. In all of her exuberance she'd forgotten them till now.

_... ::I have been __separated for so long, you see, from others of my kind.::_ ...
>

Oh no, not that. Surely not that.

::Berylline... you're here all on your own, aren't you?::

She longed to hear him deny it, for if true, the cruelty of it would

be a thing beyond imagining. The cool waters that before had been so welcome now chilled her to her core.

::There once were dragons here,:: Berylline started, slow and quiet, as if the very words carried a fulsome pain all of their own. _::Long before my time those of our kind made their playground here, just like you today. The Counternamed have seen those days.::_ He took a deep breath, sighed out hard again. _::When the thinskins were fewer, it was easy enough for those like us to hide. But the humans liked these lands and seas, it seems, for every year their numbers grew and grew. They made their homes on every shore, claimed every island as their own; and when they started cutting stones from the very breeding-caves themselves, the dragons knew they had to leave. There was nowhere left to hide.::_

::But...but you remain?::

::That is my role.:: Berylline stood up straight. _::One always must remain, one Vigilant for every sea and sky, to keep watch upon the humans, to monitor their spread. It is the only way to keep all the dragons safe.::_

Viggen stood aghast. There were breeds, she knew, for whom this lot would be no particular hardship; there were always dragons whose natures tended to the solitary. But Nadders were the most sociable of all.

Was Berylline here as part of some perverse punishment? She couldn't imagine a crime severe enough to warrant this tariff.

::Berylline...::

::It is not what you imagine,:: he replied, softly. _::Melisma has told you, I think, something of the history of the Vigilant clan, how what we do has changed through time?::_

::Yes, yes, but...::

::The fate of the Vigilant today is watcher. And to watch the humans well, one has to know their words. My only 'crime', if you will, was to be hatched with a certain facility to learn their speech; more particularly, that of the many tongues spoken in Archipelago. I was simply the most fitting for this role.::

She felt her emotions welling up once more, and this time they would not be denied. _::How...how long, Berylline?::_

He squinted then, as if considering.

::This will be my tenth year now, I think.::

With a shuddering gasp Viggen surged through the water separating them, flung out her wings, and wrapped the other dragon up in close embrace. Vaguely she noticed that the male wasn't resisting. Her breaths came quick and ragged, and the only words that seemed to fit were the self-same ones spoken to her by her mate on the very day of their transformation, such a little time ago.

_::Never more alone. You hear me? __**Never more alone!**__::_

* * *

><p>How very viking, Stoick thought.<p>

"They... panicked? The fire, all of the damage... the dragons didn't mean to do any of it?"

"That's what she says, chief. She says a great shock came to them all, no warning. It wasn't like anything they'd ever seen or felt before. It hurt and blinded them, and they just reacted on instinct, without thinking. They didn't know what else to do."

"And...and then Hiccup told them to leave...to protect them all from _us_?"

It fitted, Stoick thought. It was consistent with all of his recent learning. Also, he realised, there was a crumb of comfort there. If the dragons' fireraising had been unintended, then that was something he could take to the village, to help win them all back round, when it was time for the dragons to return â€"

Stoick blinked, there in the darkness.

Whoa.

The dragons, returning. He'd never spent so much as a moment contemplating any alternative. When had his mind set itself on this course? It certainly hadn't involved any conscious decision on his part. Stoick cursed himself inwardly: it wasn't like him not to think things through.

His thoughts swam, as if through muddy waters. Berk was certainly stronger, more secure and prosperous, with dragons living amongst them. As chief, he'd grasped that idea quickly. He'd even grown quite fond of all their new and oversized pets. But should he still welcome them as powerful, sentient, talking equals? Intelligent creatures that could, it seemed, be instantly laid low by a terrible yet unknown threat? And even if he did, could he carry the village with him in that choice?

For all of that, what would the _dragons_ want, once the truth about them was more widely known?

It was altogether too much to contemplate, all at once. Too much information, yet nowhere near enough. So much uncertainty; it really was a _mess_.

A Hiccup-sized mess, and then a bit.

If only his son was here.

"Finna... Ember... did Hiccup or Astrid â€" or their dragons â€" did they say anything, anything at all, about what was going on? Or when they might return?"

A moment's silence; Finna was, presumably, consulting with her companion. Stoick's head reeled at the very notion.

"No, chief. Astrid didn't say anything at all, and neither did

Viggen, though by the way they were behaving Ember thinks that Viggen can speak with her rider now. And Hiccup... he didn't say anything in particular. He just said that we...um, they...should leave. And that he and Astrid would be back, with their dragons, as soon as they were able."

"As soon as they were able?"

That was a bit more than Hiccup had communicated to Stoick himself. Not a lot, but enough to breathe air upon the spark of hope in Stoick. And that extra nugget of information was also enough to help him come to a decision.

"All of this needs careful handling. But Hiccup may return with new knowledge to help us all â€" the villagers and dragons both. I want him here, and Astrid too, before I take this any further with the village." He shifted his weight upon the stool, drew a calmer breath now that his path was clear. "And so we bide our time. We keep this quiet between us â€" for now." He found Ember's eyes once more, the red-gold still attentive and unwavering there in the gloom. "Will this be acceptable, Ember?"

The eyes blinked once, without hesitation, and there was a gruff grunt from the dragon.

"Yes," Finna confirmed. "She thinks the dragons will agree to this. Hiccup freed them, chief, all of them; he is special to them now. They really want him back here too."

Stoick let his shoulders relax and all his breath sigh out. "Good, then. Good."

It was progress, of a sort. The weight upon his shoulders seemed a little lighter now, even though he suspected that all he'd succeeded in was kicking this particular stone down the street a little distance.

"One thing, chief."

"Hmm?"

"There are some others, Ember says, that are very close to their dragons. Fishlegs, Snotlout, the twins as well â€" they're all quite near to doing what Ember and I have done. We could speak to all of them, riders and dragons both, help to get them started with those lives." And then, quieter and more hesitant, as if she'd picked up on her own exuberance: "If you think it right."

Stoick's skin prickled; this felt very much like a test. True, so far he'd seen naught but good in Toothless and in Ember. The devotion of those dragons to their humans was remarkable, and Hiccup and Finna seemed to thrive under dragon tutelage. But would all such unions be so blessed? Surely there was a chance that dragons were just as diverse in character as the villagers themselves. Perhaps they'd just been lucky up till now.

But maybe â€" probably, in fact â€" these extra dragon bonds were inevitable anyway.

There could be no turning back. The whole world had already

changed. It was no longer in his power to influence that " if, indeed, it ever had been.

But it was in his power, indeed it was his duty, to hold the village together. To the very best of his ability. And in that regard, it wouldn't hurt to have seven villagers able to speak with dragons, rather than just three.

It wouldn't hurt that all of those riders had real status in the village now. Everything they'd done during the battle, the courage they'd shown, the risks they'd taken " it was all still fresh in everybody's minds.

And it wouldn't hurt that one of those riders was the son of his second-in-command.

Perhaps, after all, now was the time for Stoick the Vast to show a little trust.

"Can it be done? Carefully, quietly, while we wait for the others to return?"

"Yes, chief." Finna was smiling now; he could hear it in her voice.
"Yes, it can."

* * *

><p>AN:

Chapter 13 is well underway, folks!

End
file.